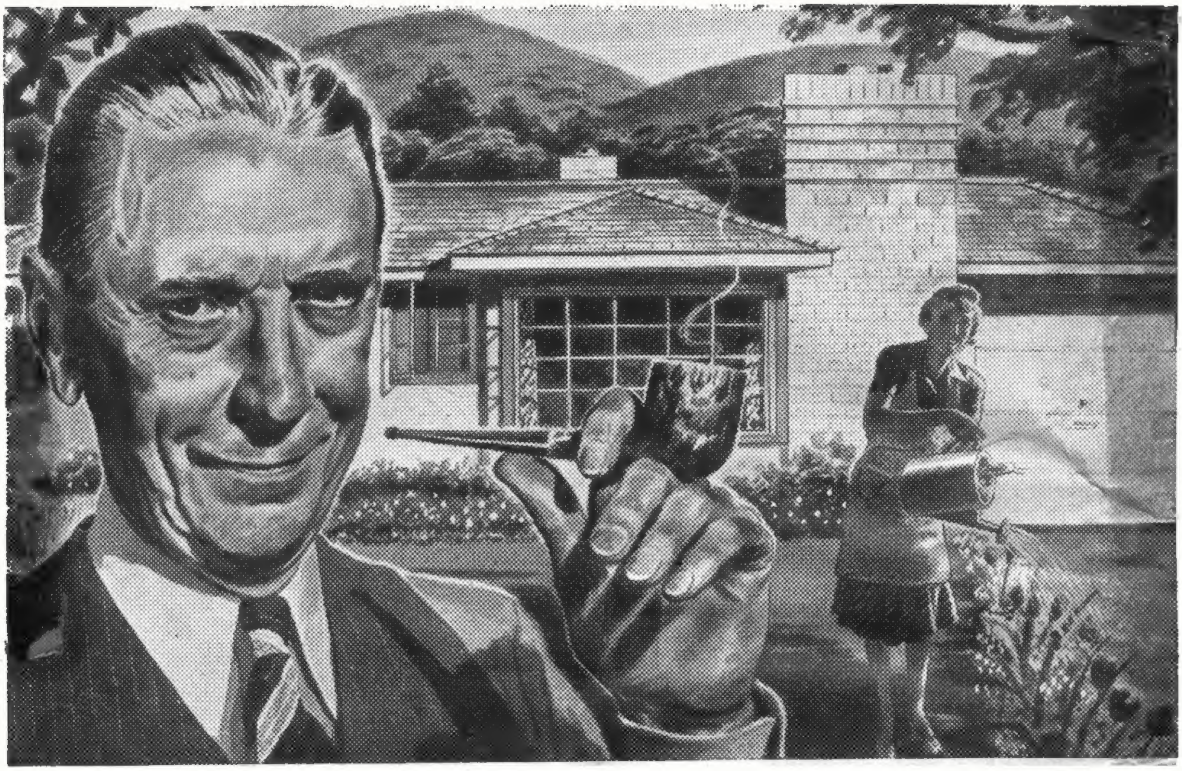
15c
THRILLING
RANCH
STORIES
JUNE
A THRILLING PUBLICATION
ADELE ROPES A RAINBOW
A Glamorous Novelet
By THELMA KNOLES
IT HAS TO BE
A Complete Novelet
By RUTH ANDERSON
TILDA OF THE TOMBOY SPREAD
A Romantic Novelet
By JOHNSTON McCULLEY
Romantic Stories of the West



Let your HEAD take you

(The average American today has a choice of just going where "his feet take him", or choosing wisely the course to follow. Let's skip ahead 10 years, and take a look at John Jones—and listen to him . . .)

"SOMETIMES I feel so good it almost scares me.

"This house —I wouldn't swap a shingle off its roof for any other house on earth. This little valley, with the pond down in the hollow at the back, is the spot I like best in all the world.

"And they're mine. I own 'em. Nobody can take 'em away from me.

"I've got a little money coming in, regularly. Not much —but enough. And I tell you, when you can go to bed every night with nothing on your mind except the fun you're going to have tomorrow—that's as near Heaven as man gets on this earth!

"It wasn't always so.

"Back in '46—that was right after the war and sometimes the going wasn't too easy—I needed cash. Taxes were tough, and then Ellen got sick. Like almost everybody else, I was buying Bonds through the Payroll Plan and I figured on cashing some of them in. But sick as she was, it was Ellen who talked me out of it.

"'Don't do it, John!' she said. '*Please* don't! For the first time in our lives, we're really saving money. It's *wonderful* to know that every single payday we have *more* money put aside! John, if we can only keep up this saving, think what it can mean! Maybe someday you won't have to work. Maybe we can own a home. And oh, how good it would feel to know that we need never worry about money when we're old!'

"Well, even after she got better, I stayed away from the weekly poker game —quit dropping a little cash at the hot spots now and then —gave up some of the things a man feels he has a right to. We didn't have as much fun for a while but we paid our taxes and the doctor and—we didn't touch the Bonds.

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Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

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THRILLING RANCH STORIES

Vol. XXXIII, No. 3 EVERY STORY BRAND NEW June, 1946

Featured Complete Novelet

ADELE ROPES A RAINBOW

By THELMA KNOLES

Mark Blair thought she was too fragile a flower to be a rancher's wife—but Adele could dream of nothing better than sharing the hardships of life in Lost Valley with him! 13

Two Other Complete Novelets

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A gun-fast man of mystery comes to the help of the girl boss of the Box D Ranch when a roaring cowtown feud rages furiously!

IT HAS TO BE.....Ruth Anderson 54
Alva Roberts of the Flying T faces a bewildering range problem when both she and her neighbor Jake Brandon want some Big Horn grassland!

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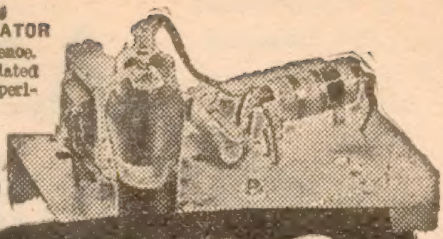

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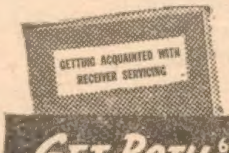

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A Department for Readers

Around the Branding Fire

Conducted by TEX BROWN

HOLA, everybody! Sure is fine to see you all gatherin' around this old brandin' fire once again. Squat you down comfortable like and roll a smoke from yore makin's, or toss down a saddle and use it for a pillow when you've stretched yore length on the ground for a rest.

While the coffee boils in the pot and barbecue drips on the coals, I'm gonna tell you somethin' o' early Tucson, the Shoo Fly Restaurant, and Colonel Jack Long's famous deevorce from his wife.

The now-thrivin' and beautiful city o' Tucson, Arizona, didn't grow so fast in the early days o' its existence, though many things were favorable to its development.

It lies in the fertile valley o' the Santa Cruz, a mile and a half wide valley where grains, fruits, and vegetables grows in rich abundance, and in frontier days was the capital o' the Territory o' Arizona.

Constant War

But the Apaches, unrelentin' in their hostilities, waged constant war and depredations, sort of scarin' the town out o' its growth, you might say.

Tucson was no Sunday School picnic, but it warn't never the rip-roarin' heldorado that was Tombstone, Abilene, Dodge City and others.

It's true the 'dobe village had its moments o' deadly brawls, quick draws, and sudden death. It was here that Wyatt Earp wound up the gang what killed his brother Morgan, finishin' off Frank Stillwell in the railroad yards, bearin' down on him with a Wells-Fargo shotgun.

Earp next got Indian Charley, though he give the outlaw 'til he (Earp) had counted three to draw his gun. Then come that young Johnny-Behind-the-Deuce, who was dyin' to answer for Morgan Earp's killin'.

The old village o' Tucson was more peaceful, somewhat more respectable than most, the Shoo Fly Restaurant bein' as pop'lar as the famous old saloons—the Quartz Rock, the Hanging Wall, the Golden West, and many others.

Constant wagon trains hauled by patient oxen or quick-movin' mules, and "carretas" drawn by the donkey or "burro" from Sonora constantly moved in and out o' the old Plaza by day and camped there at night.

Prairie Schooners

Great prairie schooners from the Missouri River rolled often to the warehouses o' Lord & Williams, Tully, Ochoa & De Long, Leopold Carillo, and others to unload their cargoes.

There wasn't any streets and pavements, lamps were unheard of, and water was hauled in from a distance.

There were garbage dumps littered with old tin cans all over the village, and rubbish piles that had been left undisturbed so long a stranger was apt to be given directions from one part o' Tucson to another by their positions.

"You want to find the Governor's house?" a citizen would ask. "Wa'l, podner, jest keep right on down that a-way past the Palace saloon 'til you gets to the second rubbish pile on yore right, then turn to yore left. . . . You can't miss it."

Time Didn't Matter

There was watches and a few clocks in the town, and some Americans went to the trouble to consult 'em at intervals, but such cursed inventions o' Satan had no influence

(Continued on page 8)

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AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 6)

on man, woman, or child o' the native population.

The divisions o' the day were regulated by the bells which clanged periodically in front o' the cathedral.

When they rang out their peal for early mass the little world o' Tucson rose up, stretched itself, and made ready for the day, though the clocks o' the Gringo might've sounded their alarm two hours before. When the Angelus sounded at midday, all made ready for the noon meal and the invariable siesta that followed.

And as vespers tolled at evenin', adobes dropped from listless hands of workmen, and docile Papago Indians, wrappin' theirselves in their pieces o' "manta" or old "rebosos," turned their faces southward, mindful of the curfew signal learned from the early missionaries.

The Shoo Fly

The isolated, desert town had its typical saloon life, but it also had a mighty respectable restaurant at which to point with pride. The Shoo Fly, so named, they say, because the flies wouldn't shoo worth a cent, although the proprietess employed muchachos to slash at them with leafy brushes throughout all meals.

The Shoo Fly Restaurant was run by a woman, a Mrs. Wallen, but unlike most respectable eatin' houses, the proprietress was not a widow.

It's said she had a husband, though he was mostly seen flittin' about the corrals feedin' the chickens, or in the kitchen peelin' tomatoes or some such. Not bein' a widow was hardly any handicap atall to Mrs. Wallen as her will was law, and she not only set a table that groaned with the best that was to be had in the desert country; she collected from one and all in advance, without any hesitation or trouble.

Among her patrons were the federal officials, the Governor, the Judge, and one Jack Long. He was spoke of as "Colonel" Jack Long, a title a newspaper had bestowed upon him, and infrequently he was called "Jedge," a title Jack Long would have none of for the reason that the title wasn't always a title o' respect on the frontier.

He had made a fortune in gold in California, but had lost it before comin' to Tucson, due, partly, to his mistake in choosin' a wife.

Not his first wife. In his early minin' days he had taken a wife from the Rogue River tribe, the daughter o' the famous chief, Cutmouth John, and they lived in peace together

(Continued on page 10)

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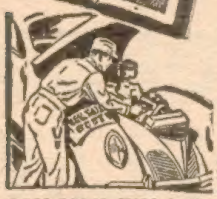

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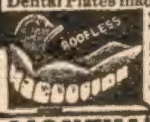

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AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 8)

until the tribe went to war with the whites. Jack Long's wife left him and went back to her own people, leavin' him easy prey for a lady from Missouri.

He Struck It Rich

In the meantime Jack and his podners had struck it rich. Upon the change in fortune Jack made a change in his personal appearance.

He promptly arrayed hisself in the whitest o' "biled" shirts, in the bosom o' which he stuck a big, diamond-cluster pin, the biggest he could buy in Sacramento.

On the warty finger of his right hand sparkled another stone, and from a heavy chain there was suspended a heavy gold watch, big as a saucer, and a bunch o' keys.

Strollin' up to the bar he'd say, "Gents, what'll you have? It's mine this time, barkeep," and he'd lay down a twenty-dollar bill and spurn the change.

The newspaper what labeled him "Colonel" was urgin' him to accept a nomination for Congress, and Jack probably would've done so, for he had the pride and the spirit for such a job, had not fickle fortune turned her back on him at that point.

The Wife From Missouri

From all accounts, the wife from Missouri was a suitable mate for him. Trouble was that the lady spent money as free or freer than Jack did. She didn't slow down none when Jack urged that the money was runnin' low in his pockets. Arguments, then quarrels followed.

At last Mrs. Long proposed that Jack give her half his money and a divorce. She'd go away and leave him alone, she promised.

Colonel Jack Long consented with alacrity and considerable fury.

Half of Everything—and How!

Now his wealth consisted of the sum of two hundred dollars, less than the lady had suspected. From that amount he deducted a double eagle, set it aside, not sayin' at the moment for what purpose, then divided the remainder of the two hundred into two equal parts.

When he'd finished that job he seized a pair of his trousers from his wardrobe which stood open in the room, and tore them leg from leg, throwing the two pieces on separate piles. Promptly coats, waistcoats, and undergar-

(Continued on page 106)

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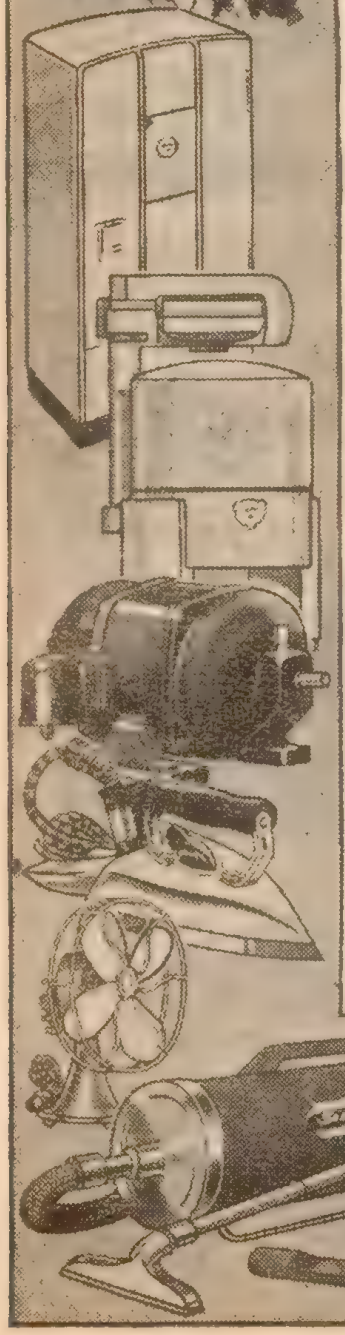

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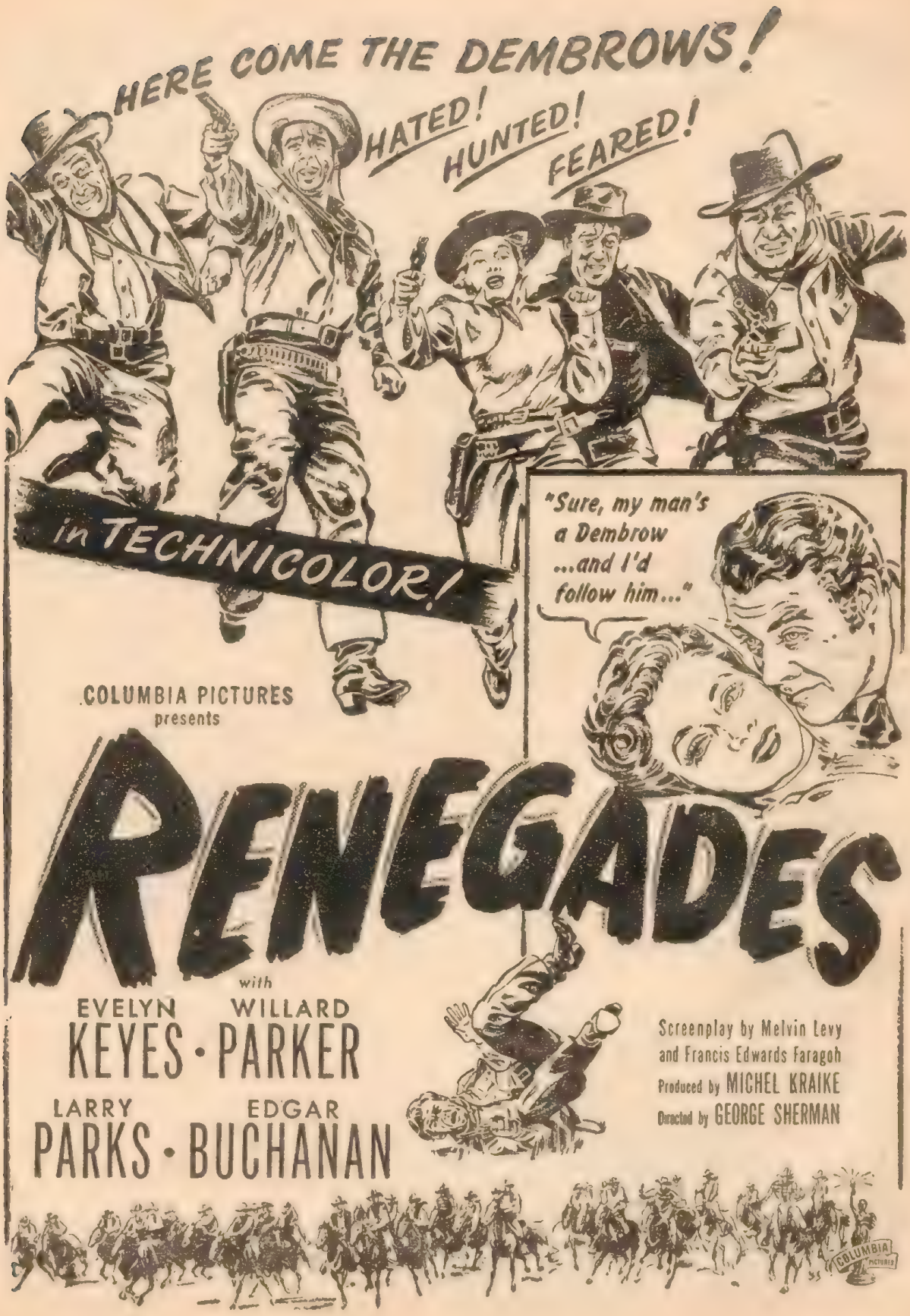
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A Glamorous Novelet

"Howdy," a quiet voice said to Adele and Adams.

Adele Ropes a Rainbow

By THELMA KNOLES

Mark Blair thought she was too fragile a flower to be a rancher's wife—but Adele could dream of nothing better than sharing the hardships of life in Lost Valley with him!

CHAPTER I

The Princess Comes Home

FOR the full two weeks since old Sam Carey's daughter, Adele, had come back from a select finishing school in the East the Diamond C had worn a festive air. It showed in the broad grins on every waddy's face, in the spruced-up look of ranchhouse and barn and corral. And it beamed from Sam Carey's proud countenance as he sat with his daughter on the veranda, both of them gazing contentedly across the rolling miles of their cattle kingdom.

Adele was worth beaming over, with her pale gold hair shining in the lowering sun, with her dusky, twilight-blue eyes and her skin the rich, satiny cream color of yucca blossoms—though she'd often complained because she wouldn't tan properly. She had always been as tiny and trim as a French wax doll, but now there was a sureness and poise in her manner that mightily pleased old Sam.

"Mark Blair ought to be showing up any time," he remarked. "I hope he gets Davis Adams to put that bridge over Thunder Gorge. It'd be the making of Mark's ranch."

Adele smiled. There was a purposeful gleam in her lovely eyes. Because Mark Blair was due at the ranch was the reason she was wearing her most becoming dress—an artfully simple little thing of soft, clinging white lawn, finished at the neck and sleeves with rows of Mexican drawn-work that cast lacy shadows on the creamy skin showing through.

"I'll be glad to see Mark," she murmured.

She had unfinished business with that tall, rangy, mule-stubborn young rancher. She thought with a rueful quirk of her luscious red lips how heartbroken she'd been when her father sent her away two years ago. How she couldn't eat or sleep for thinking of Mark Blair.

How different it would be now! She couldn't wait to meet him, to see the way his direct gray eyes would darken and then narrow when something caught his interest, and how he ran his square, hard hand through the sunburned brown hair that swirled into a stubborn cowlick over one straight, dark brow. Adele meant to catch his interest all right.

She'd learned a lot in the two years she'd been away from the Diamond C. She'd learned that an elusive dimple at the corner of her mouth could pack a greater wallop than a pearl-handled six-shooter if maneuvered right. She'd learned how to say no with her lips and yes with her eyes. Smarting over the way Mark Blair brushed her off in a big-brotherly manner Adele made a game of collecting masculine hearts.

NOT that she didn't hand the hearts back none the worse for wear, with a sweetness and kindness that was sincere. But she could have kept them if she'd wished. All that had been practice toward the time when she could send a humbled Mark Blair back to his precious Lost Valley ranch. Then her score with him would be even, and Adele Carey would go on her merry way free of a girlish infatuation.

Sam went into his office. Adele remained on the veranda, looking across the range. The road led in a series of loops to Thunder Mountain where lightning flashed blue over towering peaks. The early evening shadows were lengthening fast across the valley, blurring the gray-green of greasewood and sage into softer tones, and the expectant glow was fading from Adele's eyes when a lone rider finally came into sight.

She went down the veranda steps toward the hitching rack, moving faster and faster till her dainty slippers barely skimmed the graveled walk. There were white roses blooming there, she remembered now, and they would look very lovely on the supper table.

Adele heard the muffled beat of hoofs in the thick dust of the lane as she reached the hitching rack, and the sound kept pace with the rhythm of her own thudding heart. She reached for a cluster of roses, pulled it toward her and buried her face in the cool, fragrant petals, trying to control the trembling which shook her, trying to steady her mouth and compose her face before she greeted Mark.

It would never, never do to let him see the hot color in her cheeks, the wildly fluttering pulse at her throat, the radiance she knew blazed from her eyes. Seemingly oblivious of everything but the flowers she began picking some of the longer-stemmed blooms.

"Howdy, Miss White Rose," said a man's appreciative voice.

Adele turned with a light step.

"Good evening!" she said and then in surprise, "Why, it's Mark Blair!"

All the time her senses were so swimming in excitement that the tall, broad-shouldered man moving toward her was surrounded by a hazy blur. She must not, she must not dash madly toward him as an ecstatic kid of seventeen had once done. She must not let her voice tremble so.

"Blair?" The man's voice cut through the blur. "Sorry, but—"

Adele blinked. The blur cleared and she faced the laughing blue eyes of a complete stranger—a tall man in good riding clothes, holding an expensive Stetson in one hand,

and with the slanting sun polishing his fair hair.

"This is the Diamond C, isn't it?" he asked. "I rode out from the stage station. I'm Davis Adams, the engineer."

Adele nodded. The let down was so sharp that she felt the ground rocking under her feet. She flung back one hand to steady herself against the post, disappointment sweeping over her.

"Oh!" she cried. "Ouch!" and snatched her hand back. "Those roses," she muttered, "are thornier than a cholla."

Davis Adams promptly whisked out an immaculate handkerchief, took her wrist in a gentle but masterful grip, and dabbed at the scratch marring its pearly perfection. Automatically Adele tilted her head back and smiled up at him, playing the game she'd learned so well the past two years.

"Howdy," a quiet voice spoke behind them.

Adele spun about. A rangy cowboy in dusty jeans and a blue cotton shirt plastered to his powerful shoulders, was gravely regarding them from the saddle of a travel-weary roan.

"Mark!" she cried. The color rushed into her face as she looked up, meeting the level gray glance she remembered so well. "I—I—We've been looking for you all afternoon!"

"Honest?" asked Mark. His glance went past her to Davis Adams an ironical expression on his face. "That's right sweet of you, Adele."

He swung to the ground, tossed his reins over his arm. Breathlessly Adele introduced the two men, explaining that Davis Adams was the engineer who'd come to see about the bridge over Thunder Gorge. And all the time she was hungrily staring at Mark, was drinking in the solid strength of him, the long-limbed grace and sureness of his every move.

They walked up to the barn and there Adele turned to the engineer.

"The boys here can take care of your horse, Mr. Adams," she said. "Dad's up at the house, in his office."

Unsaddling the roan, Mark gave the stranger a friendly nod and then stood with Adele, watching the other man stride toward the house.

"I hear Adams is one of the best construction engineers in the country," Mark said.

"He must be," Adele agreed, trying to speak naturally through the excitement that gripped her. "Dad says that if anyone can put a real bridge over Thunder Gorge it'll be he—if he decides to do it."

"And thereon hangs my future," Mark stated.

FOR a moment his mouth tightened and a determined expression came into his eyes. Then he shook off his sober mood. He looked at Adele, really looked at her, taking her in from shining yellow hair to trim little slippers. Adele put aside the roses she had picked, saving a half-opened bud which she tucked in her hair.

"Ummm," Mark said as he gazed at her. "Our wild little colt's come home a high-steppin' beauty for sure."

He turned to the smiling Mexican boy who appeared from inside the barn.

"Give Frosty a rubdown, will you, Pedro?"

"Si, Senor."

Whistling, Pedro led the horse away, and Adele and Mark were alone in the doorway of the big, shadowy barn. Long bars of sunlight fell between them, swirling with golden dust particles. The scent of the rosebud in Adele's hair was overwhelmingly sweet. Off toward Thunder Mountain a rainbow's vivid arc appeared, and to Adele it seemed a radiant symbol of promised happiness.

She moved closer to Mark. Her heart was pounding painfully in her breast, threatening to suffocate her. She forced her lovely mouth into a tantalizing smile—a smile that made the best use of that elusive dimple. A little breeze stirred the soft, fair hair framing her face, ruffled its sleekness into blowing silk tassels.

"Mark," she whispered, and her eyes were dusky blue stars. "I'm so glad to be back."

His hands on her shoulders tightened. He stared deep into her eyes, and she recognized with a breath-taking lunge of her heart, the light that burned in the gray depths of his.

"The same—sweet—little kid," he said jerkily, almost protestingly. "So help me—you haven't changed a bit." His breath was a long-drawn, ragged sigh and Adele thought, but couldn't be sure, that he added, "And neither have I, darn it."

She couldn't be sure of anything as sane as words when her senses were whirling away on a shimmering rainbow trail, and she had no more poise or control than one of the spiraling dust motes in the sun. Then everything came to focus in the touch of Mark's lips to hers, in the kiss that was the

essence of all her girlhood dreams, of vague imaginings brought to warm, sweet life and held there like a point of flame between them.

The flame dissolved and she was clinging tightly to him, feeling the strong, uneven beat of his heart, feeling his hand touching her hair.

"Mark," she said softly, "why did you let me leave not knowing you felt this way? Why didn't you tell me long ago?"

His hand stilled on her hair. His whole big, solid body went rigid. Adele pushed away from him, looked up into his face. Her heart caught anew at the dear familiarity, the direct gray eyes under the heavy dark brows. With a little half-sob she reached up to smooth back the cowlick of sun-streaked brown hair swirling toward one eye.

He caught her hand, held it in a grip that was suddenly savage.

"Because you don't belong in Lost Valley, Adele Carey, any more than a butterfly belongs in—in—a bear's den."

"But—but—" Adele gasped, "don't you love me? Isn't that what you've been saying?"

"That has nothing to do with your living in Lost Valley," Mark ground out. "And well I've always known it. And managed to keep it to myself till I lost my head a minute ago." His eyes were narrowed and dark now. "It was seeing you with that engineer that knocked me off balance—and the way you smiled up at me—and the way I've missed you this past two years."

Adele's smile trembled through tears of joy and relief. Now she could admit that she'd never stopped adoring Mark Blair, not for a minute. Nor had she ever stopped longing for him to return her love. She felt that she'd reached the rainbow's end of her dreams.

CHAPTER II

Far Away Paradise

DURING the next two days Adele discovered that her problems weren't so easily solved. She didn't even get to talk to Mark alone again till the second afternoon when she found him waiting for Davis Adams in her father's office. She stated directly that she'd never even seen his Lost Valley Ranch.

Mark replied flatly that there was no place for company there. He pointed out the fact that during the rainy summer season the only way in and out of the mountain-circled basin was over Thunder Gorge. And, he added grimly, the rickety old make-shift bridge that now swung over the gorge would probably wash out any time.

"The rest of the ranchers in the Thunder Mountain country can use the long road around the spur of the mountains," he explained, "during the rainy season when Pinnacle Pass can't be traveled. But in order to even reach the road from my spread I have to cross the gorge."

"But," Adele said reasonably, "that's what Davis Adams is here for, isn't it? To see about building a good bridge over the gorge, and then a road up over the pass that'll be open all year around?"

"Yep," Mark agreed. "All I have to do is convince Adams that the bridge can be built, and that it will save the ranchers thousands of dollars every year to have a dependable way through the pass."

He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his levis and stared out the window at the distant Thunder Mountain range, cutting a blue silhouette across the cloud strewn sky. Adele wondered if he'd really put that kiss out of his mind as he appeared to have done. How could he talk about bridges when she was so burningly conscious of his nearness?

She gave a wistful little sigh.

"Mark," she said softly, daringly, "I wouldn't mind being marooned in Lost Valley—with you."

He looked straight at her then, and she saw that he hadn't forgotten. That his eyes were smouldering with emotion, were dark and intense with bitterness. His laughter broke on a harsh edge.

"Del," he said sharply, "don't be a little fool. Look at what you've been used to. And that school where you've spent the past two years. You just don't know what you're talking about."

"All that doesn't matter to me," she interrupted quickly. "I—I was getting to be such a tomboy was why Dad sent me away—"

He ignored the interruption. "Honey-child, I haven't even had water piped into my shack yet. Everything's had to go into building up the stock, first. Aunt Debbie gets along, but she came out here in a

"Where did you ride this afternoon when you rushed away?" Mark demanded

covered wagon and still thinks it's plain luxury not to have to fight Indians all the time."

"I'd like to know Aunt Debbie," Adele said stubbornly. "I'd like to make her a long visit."

Her lip trembled childishly and she bit down on it hard. How could he be so blind? How could he think plumbing could be more important to her than being with the man she loved? A tear hung on her lashes, splashed down her cheek. She was too proud to admit it was there by wiping it away.

"Oh, lord help me," muttered Mark wildly.

He reached her in two swift steps, caught her in a rough embrace and pressed her face against his shoulder.

"It's only that I want to keep that—that—shining look in your face," he murmured into her hair. "I couldn't bear to see it go out—like a candle in a hard wind, as it sure would if you got a real taste of life in Lost Valley. Can't you savvy? Maybe some day when the bridge is in, and my herd's built up a little more—"

But Adele wasn't interested in maybe some day. She wanted now. Now with Mark's arms warm and strong around her. With his voice, husky with tenderness murmuring into her hair. She pressed closely into his arms.

"Mark," she said, standing on tip-toe and lifting her face to his, "you write your Aunt Debbie today and tell her I'm coming back with you for a visit. I'll show you whether I can take living in Lost Valley or not." She gave a shaky little giggle. "What if the bridge does go out? We'll cross on a rainbow. Don't you know," she added softly, "I always manage to get my way, when I'm right?"

There was the sound of footsteps in the hall. By the time Davis Adams came into the office Adele was smoothing her hair in front of the mirror in the moose-horn hatrack, and Mark was turning the pages of a notebook.

Adele smiled at the engineer. His answering grin was openly admiring. Her dimple danced at the corner of her lips. She couldn't help it. She was so marvelously happy that she loved the whole world. No use to try to dim the sparkle that made star sapphires of her eyes, or to erase the rosy flush in her cheeks.

SHE turned, and her glowing eyes locked glances with Mark's, which more than ever reminded her of clear pools of rainwater caught in the gray granite basins lining the mountain arroyos.

"Remember," she said with breathless significance, "your letter to Aunt Debbie! The mail goes out this afternoon."

He nodded, and a wry little grin tugged at the corners of his lips, a grin of complete surrender. Adele tossed a last flashing smile at both men and left the room. She stood for a moment in the hall for the pure pleasure of listening to Mark's assured voice.

"It'll be a tough one to bridge, but it can be done," Mark was saying. "It'll have to be high, because in order to get the grade down to Mesquite Knob here, you'll have to develop as much distance as possible."

"I figure," Davis Adams said, "that by keeping the alignment on the east side of the creek, taking advantage of some natural embayments at the upper loop—"

Adele went quietly on down the hall. She was back in the office two hours later, putting the outgoing mail into its big leather pouch for Pedro to take down to the box when Mark came in.

"I have a hunch this isn't very smart of me," he said soberly, handing Adele a letter.

"You wait and see," Adele assured him. "You don't have any idea what a good frontier woman I am, Mark Blair."

He laughed. She didn't quite like the tone of that laughter, but she decided to ignore it since she'd had her way. Together they walked out to the verandah and waited till Pedro brought up the heavy mail sack that had just arrived.

"I'm looking for some more signed petitions from the ranchers," Mark declared as Adele spread the mail out on her father's desk. "There—the big envelope from Ed Shannon's Slash Bar."

Adele handed him the heavy envelope with the very round, black handwriting.

"It looks like a girl's writing," she remarked. Her glance darted to the upper left-hand corner. "Who's Josephine Shannon?"

"Reckon Jody handles the correspondence for her dad," Mark explained, ripping the envelope open. A list of signatures fell from the folds of a double page of the same round, clear writing.

"Seems like quite a long business letter," Adele ventured.

Mark looked up. "Jody's relaying all the valley gossip."

And is that all? Adele thought. There were cold prickles along her spine, her nerves tightened, and her senses sharpened as she sensed a threat to her love.

"What's she like? This Jody Shannon?" she asked.

Mark folded the letter and tucked it into his shirt pocket. There was an easy grin on his lips and a reminiscent expression in his eyes.

"Oh, she's a honey," he replied enthusiastically. "Grew up running the range like a young wildcat—can rope and ride and brand as well as any boy. You'll like Jody. Everyone does."

Murderous little thoughts darted through Adele, leaving tiny wounds in their tracks. I hate her, she thought, and was surprised to find that her hands were clenched in the folds of her skirt.

"Is the Shannon spread near Lost Valley?" she asked quite coolly.

"Across the gorge and up some twenty miles," Mark replied cheerfully. "The Shannons moved in right after you left. They're mighty interested in getting this bridge through, too."

Jody Shannon was interested in more than any bridge, Adele thought, seething with hurt and resentment. Mark went out of the office and Adele dropped down into her dad's swivel chair. She stared intently out at Thunder Mountain, not even seeing the shining rainbow it wore like a crown. It was then that she decided that she'd better make her visit to Lost Valley as Mark's announced fiancée, and with his ring on her finger.

She decided to give a dance in honor of Davis Adams. After all, as Mark Blair's future wife it was up to her to help in every way possible. Anything that made a good impression on the engineer, that inclined him favorably toward the ranchers of Thunder Mountain and particularly toward the owner of the Lost Valley spread, might influence his decision about that bridge.

But what Adele was really thinking of was the pink net dress that turned her into an irresistible enchantress—or so she'd been fervently assured. Rows of tiny, glittering sequins bordered the scalloped edges of the skirt, outlined the tight basque waist and the low sweetheart neckline. Sequin splashed roses held her pale gold curls high on her head, to show the creamy curve of her neck flowing into bare, dimpled shoulders.

Surely, Adele thought, floating down the stairway the night of the dance, surrounded by the alluring fragrance of her best French perfume, Mark would be eager to claim her as his fiancée before all their world.

THE house filled with guests arriving early, the girls in party dresses and the ranchers and cowboys in their best silk shirts and polished boots. Adele forgot her own finery at her first glimpse of Mark who arrived late from town. She hadn't known he could be so handsome. He wore a new white shirt and dark trousers and boots that set off his striking, dark good looks. His wayward, tawny brown hair was temporarily pressed back into a crisp wave, giving him an unaccustomed sleek, smooth look.

Adele noted the way the other girls' eyes openly followed him, and for a moment she felt panicky. She'd almost rather have him in his dusty jeans, squinting those direct gray eyes over the lines of a Hereford. But now he was laughing down at the clustering girls, and his smile was flashing as white as his shirt.

She signaled the fiddler to strike up the music. A hand closed possessively on her arm and she turned, ready with a dazzling smile for Mark, ready to go into his arms and show those other girls just where to get off.

But she was looking up into Davis Adams' warm, admiring eyes. With his arm encircling her waist he was leading her onto the floor, though she all but dug her pink satin slipper toes in, holding back. And then she remembered that he was the guest of honor after all, and naturally he expected to dance with her first.

He held her tightly, and she had to twist her head to find Mark through the crowd. Mark was gayly stepping off with the red-headed schoolteacher who was visiting nearby. The sight of that curly red head tucked up against Mark's white-shirted shoulder, his square brown hand along that girl's back as he guided her through the crowd went through Adele like fiery whips.

She tipped her head back to smile up at Davis Adams. Her laughter rang out as light and sweet as chimes on the wind. Her smile was brightly warm and inviting, and she didn't seem to notice that though Mark

tried to reach her several times she was danced away before he could break through the crowd surrounding her.

Or was he trying very hard? After all, for a man who'd won steer throwing contests and had ridden some of the toughest broncs in the country, Mark was being pushed back rather easily. For a moment her guard went down and she let out a little, weary sigh.

"Tired?" Davis asked tenderly. "Let's step out for a breath of air."

It was cool on the veranda. Adele went to lean against the railing. Far out in the star-studded darkness was the Thunder Mountain range, rising sharp and black against the sky. Deep within its towering cliffs and upsurging ridges it held a little green basin of a valley—Lost Valley. It seemed as far away as Paradise now. She wondered despairingly if she'd ever really see it. If Jody Shannon was destined to be its mistress.

"Adele," came Davis Adams' low voice at her shoulder. His arm dropped around her. "Adele, you're the most gorgeous thing I ever saw."

She turned quickly, and in that second she glimpsed Mark standing in the doorway. He'd started outside and stopped short. With a little cry Adele broke away from Davis and hurried to the door, but Mark had already disappeared into the crowd.

CHAPTER III

The Heart Learns

LATER Mark came up to claim his belated dance with his hostess.

"Mark," Adele whispered, "what is the matter with you tonight? What are you thinking when you look like that?"

"Plenty," he said quietly, and his gray gaze met hers steadily. Her breath caught on a half-sob, but he didn't seem to notice. "I'm thinking that no one in this whole valley ever saw anything so lovely and—and—shining as you are tonight."

"I'm glad you like my dress," she said uncertainly. "But Mark—"

He spun her about till they stopped in front of a window.

"Look," he said softly, and nodded out at the starry sky. "See Venus queening it up there? You wouldn't try to drag *her* down to earth, would you?"

"What are you talking about?" Adele gasped, feeling panic like a clutching hand at her throat. "Did you have some mescal in town?"

Mark grinned, but his eyes were stone sober. He looked past her

"Here comes an hombre who seems mighty anxious to find you," he said.

He nodded at Davis who was hurrying toward them, and then swung away. Adele took a step after him, but stopped when she saw that he was headed straight for the red-headed schoolteacher.

What was wrong? For a wild moment she wondered if Mark was fearful of antagonizing the engineer by seeming to appear as a rival for her attention. But no one knowing Mark Blair could think that.

Adele still didn't understand, and was wondering about it while she sipped coffee in the kitchen late next morning, and absent-mindedly watched the Mexican cook slapping out flat corn cakes for enchiladas, when Pedro brought her Mark's note.

"Adios, Princess," she read. "By the time you open this I'll be headed home. I reckon if that engineer figures the bridge is a good risk he'll build it. And it's time I came down to earth. Seeing you last night so beautiful, and surrounded by all the good things in life—even sashaying around with that dude engineer, cuss him—made me see things straight. Which is that you could never belong in Lost Valley. This'll make you mad for a minute Del. You're plumb used to getting your own way, but you'll get over it. And I reckon I will, too. So, adios, Angel. Mark."

Adele read it swiftly. Then she ran down the hall to her father's office, her satin negligee flying out behind her and the heels of her little silk mules clattering like rapid gunfire.

"Dad—oh, dad!" she cried, flinging herself into his lap.

He took Mark's note from her shaking hand.

"I w-wanted him to be jealous and give me a ring before I went to visit his Aunt Debbie," she sobbed.

Sam Carey read the note. "Reckon," he growled, "that this is where you needed a woman's advice and didn't get it, poor baby. I thought you were prettier'n a strawberry shortcake in that pink dress—enough to turn any man's head. However, let's look at this

from Mark's point of view. He's a mighty stubborn, proud young buckaroo—"

"He's j-just plain hard-headed and mean," Adele choked out.

"Del, I figure you scared him off," Sam declared. "You'd a stood more chance hog-tying that wild bronc if you'd a give a barbecue instead of a dance, and if you'd worn yore old levis instead of that fancy dress."

Adele sniffed. "He just doesn't w-want to be engaged. He's afraid for me to come to Lost Valley."

"Ummm," muttered Sam. "Well, suppose you let me look over these papers. Adams was asking me something about those petitions."

Adele got up and walked over to stare blindly into the hatrack mirror.

"I'll be hornswoggled if that loco young fool didn't hightail it off without signing this here paper Adams was asking about special!" her dad roared a moment later.

Adele turned back to the desk.

"Why is it so important that Mark sign anything?" she demanded. "He said Davis knew all the facts now, and he'd either build that bridge or not, and—"

"Facts?" yelled Sam. "What them big companies wants is everything laid out and signed before they'll move a finger. Danged young fool, getting his dander up and tearing off this way." He scowled out the window. "Don't know just who I can send after him, neither, with the round-up just getting under way. Likely what Mark really stampeded off back to Lost Valley for, too. Heard him say something about sending a good bunch of yearlings out to market provided he could get them down out of the hills and branded in time."

Adele interrupted him. "Dad, *I'm* going to take that paper to Mark, so don't waste time arguing about it." She planned excitedly. "It's only a two-day ride and I can stay at Mosely's overnight." She dropped a swift kiss on his head. "Lost Valley, here I come!"

AN HOUR later she was ready to ride, dressed in her old ranch clothes and with her own small pistol holstered around her waist. Her father swore that it was a fine pass when gals took off across the country that-a-way, and he hoped her ma's folks never got wind of it or they'd have him strung up to his own gate-post. But there was a proud gleam in his eyes.

Adele knew that he wasn't really worried about her, that he was as confident that she could take care of herself as though she'd been a son instead of a daughter. Sam Carey wasn't fooled by a twinkling dimple and spun silk curls and a doll-like size. He knew his daughter well.

Two days later Adele reached Thunder Gorge. The daily thunderstorm had just blasted itself out, and the canyon was roaring with flood water, beating its way between rocky walls. It seemed to Adele that she could actually see the spindly supports to the bridge buckle and sway. She shuddered, and urged her horse across.

She rode up over a little ridge, then down through a grove of cottonwoods. The small adobe ranchhouse rested on a little meadow dotted with white Bethlehem stars and blue rutabaga lilies, and Adele approached it with excitement so intense that it was a throbbing pain in her breast.

As she rode into the yard a little old lady came to the open door. Adele smiled at her radiantly. Mark's Aunt Debbie was as small as she herself.

[*Turn page*]

"Land sakes," Aunt Debbie cried, coming outside, "you must be the Carey girl Mark wrote about. Light and come in, child. Mark isn't home yet. He sent word he was aimin' to stop and corral some help for his round-up." She turned and called, "Bandy, see to Adele's horse."

A bow-legged, wizened old fellow came from the direction of the barn.

"Howdy, Miss Del," he said with a grin. "I knowed yore pa years ago."

Adele liked Bandy immediately. She loved Aunt Debbie. She was at home in Lost Valley as she'd always known she would be. She felt so happy that it was like a song rushing through her. When Mark got home she'd be all ready for him. And he'd be bound to see how naturally she fitted into his life.

Aunt Debbie showed her into a neat, lavender-scented, white-washed bedroom. With an elaborately casual air she brought out a new wedding-ring design patchword quilt and spread it on one of the two cots.

"Why, what a beautiful quilt!" Adele exclaimed.

The old lady stood looking down on the quilt with its interlocking circles made up of tiny, vivid segments of material put together with thousands of even stitches.

"I always taken to little, spry women," she stated abruptly. "I notice them big, brassy ones like the Shannon gal like to lie abed of mornings, and eat between meals. But shucks, men-folks don't see things like that till it's too late."

She looked squarely up at Adele. They exchanged a long, understanding glance, while Adele's color deepened and her eyes took on a confident sparkle.

Next morning Adele put on the old jeans again, and a fresh cotton shirt, with the sleeves rolled high over her slender arms. She braided the taffy-yellow hair into thick pigtails tied with blue ribbons that fluttered like butterflies at each turn of her head.

She dipped water from the spring for Aunt Debbie, and laughed to see her reflection rippling and dissolving under her eyes. So did troubles disappear when you really tackled them, she thought. And underneath everything else was that burning current of excitement that drew her eyes to the ridge where the trail dipped down to the house, where she'd first glimpse Mark, coming home.

Mid afternoon the usual rain clouds boiled up black and heavy over the mountain peaks. The air became electric and tense, and Adele, returning from a ride around the basin felt a wild exhilaration as she turned her face to the freshening wind.

Old Bandy appeared from a ride up the mountainside, herding a maverick calf in front of him.

"I seen Mark's blue roan headin' toward the bridge," he remarked. "Reckon he ought to show up over the ridge any minute now. Hey!" he yelled after Adele who was swinging her pony around. "The storm's gonna break any minute!"

But Adele urged the pony into a lope. She wanted to meet Mark alone. She reached the cottonwood grove and halted, jumped to the ground. There was a brisk clop-clop of hoofs coming toward her, and Mark's blue roan broke into view.

"Welcome home!" Adele cried.

THE wind rattled the leaves above her, but the sound was drowned in the hard pound of her own heart. Her ribbons fluttered madly and whipped against her cheeks, but her pulse fluttered even more wildly.

"Adele Carey!" Mark exclaimed.

"Who on earth?" another voice cried shrilly.

Adele stepped back out of the flickering leaf shadows and stared at the rider coming up beside Mark. She was looking up at a girl whose black hair streamed in the wind, whose face was burned to a healthy red-brown and whose widened dark eyes looked enormous.

Then Mark dismounted and came forward. Adele was stammering out explanations about the paper he'd forgotten to sign, and Mark was saying something about Jody Shannon coming along with him to visit Aunt Debbie.

Jody slipped from her saddle to stand beside Mark. She was very tall. Adele had to look up to her and that made her furious. Or, rather it was the way Jody stood shoulder to shoulder with Mark, staring at Adele as though she were an unwelcome stranger who'd wandered uninvited into the valley.

Lightning darted fiery tongues across the darkening sky and the thunder rolled and crashed. The elements were no more stormy than Adele's emotions. She returned Jody's stare with eyes the dusky, flame-laced darkness of the rain clouds. Then Jody's smile flashed and she slipped her hand familiarly through Mark's arm. Adele winced at that

possessive gesture.

"Why, Mark!" Jody cried, "she's frightened of the storm! Poor thing. Didn't you see her shudder?"

Adele found her voice then. "I'm not frightened," she declared furiously, "of the storm or anything else." She groped for the reins that she'd tossed over her saddle horn. "I was just going for a ride."

She sprang into the saddle, turned the pony and blindly headed him up the ridge.

"Del!" Mark called after her.

Jody's high voice cut across his words. "Maybe she wants to be alone, Mark. And besides, the storm is circling the basin. She'll be safe. Let's get these things up to the house."

Adele rode blindly on. She had more than half a notion to keep going, across the bridge and away from Thunder Mountain. Never to see Mark Blair again. But there was that document she'd brought. To save her pride she'd have to take that paper back home with Mark's name on it.

A few cold rain drops spattered against her face, mingling with the hot tears on her cheeks. Then the storm rolled back, gathering itself around the peaks of Thunder Mountain. Adele mopped her damp face with her bandana and felt that she'd done with tears forever. Mark didn't really love her. He had decided that Jody was the one for him.

She simply couldn't go back to the house yet. So she rode on toward the gorge. She rode upstream from the bridge, along the bank where huge granite boulders hung balanced on the rims. So Jody Shannon thought—or pretended to think—that Adele Carey was easily frightened. Was a shuddering, scary weakling. Adele muttered things into the damp, fragrant wind that tugged at her hair till it caught one of her blue bows and swirled it away like a winged thing set free.

If they should happen to be marooned in Lost Valley, the three of them, she'd make that big hulk of a girl change her tune. A wild, reckless notion struck through her, causing her to catch her breath and stare hard at the overhanging boulders. It would be so easy to wedge the end of a broken limb under the edge of one of those rocks, to send it hurtling down the bank and toward the spindly bridge. No one could ever know.

She slipped from her saddle, walked up to a cluster of the rearing boulders. Then, with a regretful little sigh she turned away. She was no bridge wrecker, even though her own dreams had been blown sky high.

CHAPTER IV
Girl Cowhand

BACK at the ranchhouse Adele walked into a kitchen warm and fragrant of chocolate cake. Mark came into the room as Adele stepped inside. He'd changed to a clean blue shirt and his hair was freshly brushed, lying damply smooth on his well-shaped head. His glance flashed to Adele, her face flushed from her swift ride, and her hair blown into a soft fluffiness.

For a heart-stopping second she caught a glimpse of the smouldering lights in his eyes that always made her senses reel.

"Del," he said, "Aunt Debbie tells me you rode out here just to bring me some fool paper to sign."

"I—I was planning on visiting your ranch, anyhow, you know," Adele reminded him.

He came close to her and she bit her lip to steady herself, to keep the love she felt from speaking so plainly from her face. After all, she must hang onto some shreds of pride and dignity.

"So that was it," Mark murmured, and the lights went out of his eyes. His voice hardened. "You just had to have your way, didn't you?"

"Dinner's ready, Mark," came Jody's smug voice from the direction of the stove. "Everything like you always like it."

She carried a steaming gravy-boat to the table, and as Mark turned toward her Adele wished savagely that Jody would stumble, would spatter hot gravy down the front of her red-and-white checked apron with its starched ruffles and flaunting, flaring bow.

Jody smiled sweetly at Adele.

"I always help dear old Aunt Debbie whenever I can," she explained. "So I brought over the cake and planned to stay several days while Mark was so busy with his round-up. That always makes extra work on a ranch, you know."

Is she telling me? Adele thought, and a scornful smile twisted her mouth as she thought of the round-ups she'd ridden ever since she was large enough to balance in a

saddle, till her dad had sent her off to school to learn to be a lady.

"Yes," she agreed coolly. "That's why I'd better be getting home, too. If you'll sign that paper, Mark, I'll be lighting out first thing in the morning." She managed to keep the smile on her lips. "It was nice to see Lost Valley at last."

"I reckon, Miss Del," came Bandy's dry voice from the door, "that you'll be seeing more of it for the next week. The bridge done give way at last."

There was a confusion of surprised exclamations. Then a little silence into which Adele's shocked protest sounded very loud.

"Why, it—it couldn't be!" she said.

Mark turned to look at her. She was thinking of how near she'd come to loosening that boulder. She was wondering if thoughts actually had the power that some claimed when his sharpening gaze caught hers.

Adele's glance wavered. A hot tide of color stained her face. She knew that she looked as guilty as she felt. Mark brushed past her.

"Take my bay, Boss!" Bandy yelled after him. "I'll saddle the roan and be right after you."

Adele went out of the kitchen and into the first bright glow of the sunset. She walked to a log bench by the little spring and sank down on it, tilted her head against a granite boulder.

So, here she was. Here to stay for perhaps a week. What more could she ask? Deliberately she pushed away all thought of Jody Shannon. With half-closed eyes she gazed at the sky, the drama of flame-bordered storm clouds changing shape and color even as she watched. A fading rainbow hung like a frayed, pale ribbon across a distant gap. It made Adele feel sad and a bit frightened.

"Just where," came Mark's dangerously quiet voice beside her after a timeless interval, "did you ride this afternoon when you rushed away?"

Adele straightened, her eyes flew wide open and she looked up into Mark's set face.

"Where?" she echoed. Then with gathering indignation at his tone, "That's none of your business."

"I'll tell you then," he replied angrily. "You rode down by the gorge. You dismounted and walked up to the boulders upstream from the bridge."

Adele sprang to her feet. "Do you think *I* rolled boulders down till they crashed into your old bridge?" she demanded hotly.

But as she remembered how nearly she had done just that her face paled and her voice trembled.

MARK stared at her bleakly. "I found one of your ribbons down the bank," he informed her.

Adele could only stare at him, her eyes feeling glazed in their sockets, her face frozen into blankness.

"You said," he reminded her sternly, "that you always had your way. I reckon just because I told you not to come here you were bent to do just that. And to stay till you got ready to leave. Maybe," his scornful tone went through her like the lightning lashing the clouds that afternoon, "you even had some wild idea of getting Davis Adams up here and your dad high-pressuring him into getting that bridge built."

Adele felt her knees beginning to buckle. She moistened her dry lips with her tongue. She struggled for something to say, something devastating, but tears were gathering back of her eyelids, were making a hot, aching lump in her throat.

"The worst of it is, Boss," came Bandy's anxious voice, "that now the Gomez boys can't get here in time to help round up them yearlings."

Mark turned from Adele. "We'll do it ourselves," he snapped. "I have to get those beefs out in time to catch that drive south."

Bandy let out a shrill whistle. "It cain't be done. Not just you and me, Boss. Not even if we work without stopping, we cain't chose them critters out, corral and brand them in time. We need at least one more hand."

"Well," came Aunt Debbie's annoyed voice, "I want to hear how the bridge went out and what we're aimin' to do about it."

"Looks like it just washed out," Mark said grimly. "Like we been expectin' it to for the last couple of rainy seasons." He never glanced at Adele standing still and small against the granite boulder. "Soon as the word gets out that engineer staying at the Diamond C will get a crew up and a temporary span across."

"But dang it," Bandy broke in, "what I want to know is how we're agoin' to get them yearlings ready for market."

Aunt Debbie placed her hands on her hip. "Well, well," she drawled, "now I

reckon is Jody's chance to show she's a good ranch hand."

"Jody?" Mark asked, but his voice quickened with hope.

Bandy disgustedly turned his head and spat tobacco juice.

"Sure enough," Aunt Debbie continued calmly, "I been hearing for years how she could rope and ride and brand, ain't I?" She glanced over her shoulder. "Yonder she comes now, trailing around like a queen in that there kimono she got from the mail-order house."

"What's everyone staying out here for?" Jody called, coming down the trail in a rose-splashed, black sateen wrapper. "I thought I'd get into something comfortable for the evening," she explained self consciously, tightening the sash around her waist and picking her way along in high-heeled slippers, swishing the long skirts around her ankles.

"Jody," said Mark heartily, "am I glad you're here!" He strode toward her. "You can help Bandy and me get those yearlings rounded up. The three of us can have them all branded and ready by the time Adams comes charging up here to throw a bridge across the gorge."

His hands closed on Jody's arms and he gave her an affectionate little shake. Adele closed her eyes and leaned limply back against the boulder. Two hot tears squeezed from under her lashes and rolled unheeded down her cheeks.

Adele had thought she couldn't live through the night, occupying the same room as Jody. She'd surely never be able to go to sleep beneath the gay wedding-ring quilt with the scorn in Mark's voice ringing in her ears, with that bleak accusation in his eyes stabbing through her. And worst of all was the relief and confidence in his manner when he turned to Jody.

The other girl settled down on her cot and turned her back. Adele lay looking out the open window, feeling the mountain-sweet breeze like a cool caress on her hot face. She stared up at the star-patterned, black sky till the stars blurred and shimmered in a dizzy dance, and, amazingly enough, she fell soundly asleep.

She woke at the sound of voices in the kitchen. The gray sky was just streaking rose over the eastern rim of the mountains. Jody still slept deeply. Adele splashed her face with the icy cold water from the china pitcher, quickly combed and braided her hair and dressed.

She tiptoed out of the bedroom and to the kitchen.

"Send Jody down to the corral soon as she's ready," Mark was saying to Aunt Debbie while he poured coffee for Bandy. "She—" He glanced up, saw Adele in the doorway and stopped short.

"Look out, ye dang fool!" yelled Bandy, grabbing the tilting coffee pot.

Adele's color deepened and the dimple appeared at the corner of her mouth.

"Up bright and early, ain't ye?" Debbie said approvingly. "Little women is always the ones to get around." She sent a disparaging glance toward the room where Jody slept.

JODY hadn't appeared when they finished breakfast, and it was Adele, slim and straight as a boy in her ranch clothes, who accompanied Mark and Bandy to the corral, who saddled the roan pony for herself and headed for the mountain slopes with the two men.

"I can hold the cattle in a bunch while you rustle them out of the brush," she declared.

Mark looked at her doubtfully. "That's a pretty tough job. Some of these beefs have been up in the hills all summer."

"Try me," Adele challenged him.

It was tough, but not too tough. She rode close circle on the gathering herd, keeping an alert eye on a couple of wild-eyed steers. Her pony was well-trained and she hadn't lost a yearling by mid-morning when they paused to take stock.

Mark said with satisfaction that they'd better take the bunch they had down to the corral and start branding. As they rode down the mountain side Jody appeared, riding leisurely toward them.

"Fine hand you turned out to be," Mark chided her half-seriously.

Jody urged her pony close to his. "It's the mountain air," she explained, "it always makes me sleepy." Mark grinned down at her, and she smiled radiantly up into his face.

When it came to the branding Jody made a great show of her skill with a rope. For about an hour she performed like a rodeo champ and Adele had to sit back and acknowledge that she could toss a mean loop. Then an ugly tempered long-horn made a

break for the brush. Jody swung wide, missed him and lost her balance, sailing out of her saddle to land on the soft sand with a thud.

"Haw! Haw!" cackled Bandy, "that was as pretty a spill as I ever see."

Mark cut after the runaway steer and edged it back into the corral. Then he turned with a teasing remark for Jody, but the dark girl still sat on the sand.

Riding up, Adele caught a glance of pure malice divided between herself and Bandy. Then Jody turned toward Mark and spoke with a catch in her voice,

"I—think I've hurt my back," she said.

"Back?" echoed Bandy. "That ain't where you landed, sis."

Adele swung down from her saddle.

"Jody," she offered, "I took home nursing at school. Let me see if—"

Jody brushed her away. "Don't bother me." She glared at Adele and turned to Mark. "If you'll just lift me into the saddle I'm sure I can make it to the house."

"There goes your hand, Mark," Bandy said dryly as Jody rode away. He winked at Adele. "I didn't figure her to last long."

CHAPTER V
Love Lingers

MARK tugged his hat down on his head, set his jaw at an angle and went at the branding with a grim determination that discouraged further conversation. Adele stuck it out the whole long, dusty, back-breaking day. More than once she had cause to be thankful for the times she'd gone out on the round-up at the Diamond C and worked like any hired hand.

They dragged in for supper, Adele sure that each step was her last. In the bedroom she looked longily at her smoothly made cot. But she turned away and splashed water on her face, dampened a comb and fluffed out the tight ringlets at her forehead.

Jody languidly rose from the sofa in the parlor. She trailed her way to the table, hugging her rose-flowered kimono around her, smiling at Mark.

Dinner revived Adele a bit. She set down her coffee cup and looked up to meet Debbie's approving glance full on her, and gave a weary sigh of contentment. Mark was staring at her with a strange expression on his face. When she caught his glance he looked away swiftly. He stood up and pushed back his chair.

"It's bright moonlight tonight," he declared, and walked toward the door. "I'm going to finish that bunch we corraled today."

Adele swallowed hard. Then she stood up, too, followed him. At the door Mark turned so suddenly that she almost ran into him.

"I'm g-going, too," she said breathlessly.

He was so close to her that she had to tip her head back to meet his glance. Then she saw that his mouth was set in a straight, hard line. He reached down and scooped her into his arms, carried her across the room and into the bedroom where he dumped her down on her cot.

"Stay there," he ordered brusquely.

Adele lay back with her head on her arms. Jody's voice rose plaintively from the kitchen.

"Oh, Mark, don't go out again," she pleaded. "I was going to make the kind of fudge you like best."

Adele rolled over and listened intently. She smiled when the kitchen door closed and she could hear Mark's footsteps going away.

The next two days Jody lay around in her flowered kimono and Adele worked along with Bandy and Mark. On the third day Mark tossed down the branding iron he held, released the bawling calf to join its fellows and announced on a long, weary sigh that they'd done the job.

He turned to stare at Adele, small and dusty and disheveled, sitting her pony like any sturdy little ranch kid who'd been at the job since she could stick in a saddle.

"You get to the house and get some rest," he said almost harshly. "Your old man and that engineer are going to be showing up any time now and I don't want them to take one look at what Lost Valley's done to you and reach for their six-shooters."

Adele's grimy little face went white beneath layers of dust. The sharpness of Mark's tone cut her to the heart. Without a word she wheeled her pony and headed for the house. And she had dared to hope she'd changed his mule-stubborn mind for him. That she'd made him see that she was of the stuff of pioneer maids.

Next morning she stayed in her room till she heard Mark and Bandy leave. Then she

got up and dressed listlessly, moving with a numbness that she felt would be with her forever.

It was early afternoon when Sam Carey, Davis Adams and the construction crew arrived. By next morning they had a temporary span over the gorge, and one of the cowboys, Slim Morris, from the nearest spread on the other side dared the first trip across.

"I want to speak to you, Mark, private," Slim said excitedly. "It's about what I seen just before the bridge went down."

Mark's face closed up. He avoided looking at Adele.

"What difference does it make now, Slim? It would have gone out anyhow, sooner or later, and as it happened I got my herd rounded up without the Gomez boys."

They walked a little way apart from the others as they talked.

Sam gave his daughter a bear hug.

"How're you doing, honey?" he asked. "I held Adams off long as I could, but he's been raring to get that bridge started ever since you left."

Adele drew him aside.

"Dad, was it necessary for Mark to sign that paper I brought?" she asked bluntly.

Sam chuckled. "I figured it was necessary for you to have some excuse to follow him out here, baby."

Suddenly Jody, who'd been making up to Davis Adams, brushed by Adele.

"Just a minute, Slim," she called, "I want to hear what you're telling Mark about that bridge."

"Well, maybe you do at that," Slim replied coolly.

Adele followed Jody. "I may have to get in on this," she explained to her dad.

NOW, she was thinking, was the time once and for all to make it clear to Mark Blair that she certainly had not done anything to hasten the destruction of the Thunder Gorge Bridge.

"So I see this little button streaking it out across the range," Slim was saying in a low, earnest voice, "and I wonder how come? I went on, and I barely reached the bank when the bridge caved in. Just went kersplash. First I thought some of them big boulders rolled down at last, and I looked up that way. You couldn't tell, they're thicker'n fleas on a dog's ear along both banks. Then I looked down in the stream bed, but it wasn't no boulder that smashed that timber." He paused and stared around for full effect.

"Well?" Mark demanded, an impatient edge to his voice. "If you're sure it wasn't a boulder that rolled against it, what was it?"

"That timber on the far end, the end toward the other side there," he jerked his head toward the opposite bank, "had been sawed mighty nigh through."

"Sawed?" Mark demanded. "You sure?"

"Dead sure," Slim replied. "And furthermore, I turned around and run down that little button and sure enough he was packing a saw."

There was a moment's silence. Mark scowled and Slim waited, rolling a wad of tobacco around in his jaw.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Jody broke in, "go on and tell. It was my brother, Billy, who sawed that timber. I promised to buy him a new saddle for the rodeo if he'd do it." Her words were defiant, but her voice was shaking and quivery as she turned to Mark, "And what are you going to do about it?"

"Why did you do that, Jody?" Mark asked blankly.

Jody gulped. "I had to do something. Ever since we came here all you'd talk about was Adele Carey. I th-thought if you and I were shut off here in the valley for a week or so, if you saw what a g-good cook I was and everything you'd maybe forget Adele Carey long enough to see I was alive."

"Why, Jody," Mark began awkwardly.

"Don't worry!" she flared at him. "I wouldn't have you now if I were marooned with you in Paradise forever! A whole four days and you don't do a thing but work cattle! Coming in without shaving." She shuddered. "Riding. Roping. Branding. Why, I want some fun out of life! I wouldn't stay on a two-bit, shoe-string spread like this another week for any man alive!"

She whirled on Slim. "And if you say a word about Billy doing this I'll swear it's all a lie, and I'll tell about that time you got drunk and broke the windows in old lady Shuster's cabin—"

"Now, now, Jody," Slim cut in anxiously, "no one's aimin' to get Billy in trouble. I just thought Mark ought to know it wasn't no accident."

"Far as I'm concerned it was an accident, Jody, all of it," Mark assured her hastily.

He was looking past her to Adele. She saw the smouldering lights in his eyes and for a moment her pulses fluttered and her very bones seemed to melt. Then she stiffened. She could never forget him riding toward her with Jody at his side, bringing the other girl into Lost Valley.

She turned and ran toward the bridge. "I'm coming, Dad," she called unsteadily.

"Hold on, Miss Del!" She'd reached the bridge when Bandy came trotting down from the ridge. "Aunt Debbie's took a sudden attack. Heart, or somethin'. Anyhow she sent me hightailing it after you, pronto. You'd better come, you having took that home nursing."

"I don't savvy," Mark kept saying, striding along beside her. "Aunt Debbie never had a sick day in her life. Why, she's tough as rawhide even though she's no bigger than a minute."

Inside the cabin Debbie lay limply on the parlour sofa. She lifted her eyelids weakly and stared dazedly at them. She clutched feebly for Adele's hand with her gnarled old fingers.

"Don't leave me, Del," she gasped hoarsely.

"I won't," Adele promised.

She took the old lady's pulse, felt of the veined forehead and frowned.

"I feel better already," Debbie whispered.

"Can I tell your dad you'll be stayin'?" Mark asked anxiously. "They're waiting at the bridge."

Adele nodded. "I'll be along when Aunt Debbie is better."

"Hadn't I better get the doctor from town?" Mark asked from the doorway.

Debbie roused herself. "If that sawbones sets foot in here I'll blast him with my six-gun," she said firmly. "Del's all I need."

WHEN Mark came back Adele met him at the door.

"She's asleep now," she whispered, and slipped outside.

"She doesn't sound like she's breathing very good," Mark said, listening to the old lady's light snores. "Doesn't sound just natural."

Adele smiled reassuringly and walked a little way from the house.

"She'll be all right," she insisted.

Mark followed her. They stood watching the heat lightning flaring over the looming peaks.

"Reckon," Mark said finally, staring straight ahead, "that I owe you an apology. 'Bout that bridge."

"Well," Adele confessed, "I did ride that way, and the wind did blow one of my ribbons off."

"You must have thought," she added when he said nothing more, "that I'd go to any lengths to stay here in Lost Valley." She couldn't, thinking about Jody, keep the hurt and bitterness out of her voice.

Mark reddened. He made two false starts and then spoke in a low, husky voice.

"Reckon I was the one did that," he said. "Went to any lengths to keep you here, I mean."

Adele's breath caught. Her eyes flew wide. "What do you mean?" It seemed to her the very wind through the trees stopped to listen.

"Well," Mark growled out, "any fool would know anyone as light and little as you could have got through Pinnacle Pass. The Parker kid made it twice last month just for devilment. I could have sent you out the day after the bridge went down."

He stared fiercely at her as though daring her to laugh. "But I—I—it was so nice seeing you around here, and getting along so well with Aunt Debbie, and—hang it all, Bandy and I couldn't have got those beefs ready for market without you."

"You—you're actually saying you needed me here," Adele murmured. All the rainbows in the world were shining in her eyes, were trembling through the soft-spoken words.

"And now," Mark said miserably, "you'd be gone if it weren't for Aunt Debbie needin' you. I've been such a hard-headed, scary fool, Del."

"Mark," Adele said in a shaky voice, "there was nothing the matter with Aunt Debbie. She was just—just giving me a chance to stay on. She told me as soon as you left. I could easily have caught up with you and gone with Dad."

Her confession was lost in the wild whoop which Mark gave as he caught her to him.

"Honey-child," he said with his lips against her cheek, "it looks like you're going to be marooned in Lost Valley for life."

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Next Issue: JACKIE OF THE OPEN RANGE, Novelet by STEPHEN PAYNE

Hattie booted Adam in the seat of his pants

Adam from New Eden

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Hattie Pringle promotes a padlockless paradise but finds that crooks are no respecters of Milldew's civic pride!

FIVE minutes after the monthly meeting of the Milldew, Montana, Civic Improvement Society had been called to order, it was as plain as the lack of a nose on a mudworm's face that Hattie Pringle, the president, had pounced upon a brilliant idea. Even Judge Tolliver admitted it. He got to his feet with a yelp.

"Hooray fer Hattie! It's a pergressive bonanza, feller citizens! It's a—"

"It is that too," Hattie beamed, and banged her gavel against the table. "Sit down, you

ol' fossilhead. Don't you know anythin' about Parlermentrecy percedure. As I was sayin', I tumbled t' the idea las' night. Milldew has the lowes' crime rate fer any community in Montana. Nobody can say it ain't as look at the records! I had this painted."

Hattie signalled toward the wings of the little stage of the Odd Fellow's Hall and two citizens came out carrying a great sign that said:

COME TO MILLDEW FOR SAFE KEEPING! WHERE HONEST HEARTS BEAT AS ONE! LOWEST CRIME RATE IN MONTANA. YOU ARE ENTERING MILLDEW, THE PADLOCKLESS PARADISE. BRING YOUR FAMILIES! BRING YOUR BUSINESSES. STOP AT THE MILLDEW HOUSE—LOOK FOR THE SIGN, HATTIE PRINGLE, REAL ESTATE. LISTEN TO THE HAPPY LAUGHTER OF OUR CHILDREN!

"Thought a li'l advertisin' on the side wouldn't hurt," Hattie said quickly. "Now we'll name committees fer the campaign an' start rollin', huh? No competition here, not even from a town called New Eden. They had two holdups there las' week, a wife-beatin', a gamblin' den raid an' a riot at the Moose picnic. Judge Tolliver is general chairman. Clem Hooks is publisticy—"

A half hour later, the meeting broke up amid wild applause for Hattie Pringle. She grinned broadly as she picked up her shoes and put them on. She was sure she heard a few chirps out of the bedraggled bird that nestled in a bunch of grapes on her old sky-piece.

"There is great da-a-a-a-a-ys comin'," she sang. "Everythin' in ro-o-o-o-sy now!"

She flicked a spot of imaginary dust from a taffeta sleeve and left the hall. Milling citizens offered her congratulations as she lumbered across the street toward her office building.

"Oh, it wa'n't nothin'," Hattie snickered. She was glad however, to get to her old baling-wire bound armchair in her office.

"Kin I draw 'em outa the hat, Pete?" she asked a picture that hung from the wall. "Less crime'n any other community in the state. Glad you ain't sheriff—er—I am only kiddin', you ol' stewpot. Times've changed an' sheriffs mos'ly git hurt now lookin' t' see if a gun is loaded or comin' home after midnight from a poker game they was not supposed to go to. Good thing you fergot t'duck, Pete. You wouldn't like the modern worl'."

Hattie worked out some more campaign slogans and then closed up and left her office. As she was about to load herself into her Model T, Judge Tolliver appeared.

"Sure throwed the hooks in t' Appleby, Hattie. Met him over in the hardware store. Had t' come t' Milldew for some nails as after that store was stuck up in New Eden, the perprietor got scairt an' closed up fer a week. Never saw Adam shorter of words. He looked like he had found out he'd swallered a caterpillar in a drugstore san'wich when I tol' him what we was goin' t' do."

"I oughter pass an ordnance to close your big mouth, you ol' foghorn," Hattie said. "Why did you have t' git vaccinated with a phonograft needle? Well, I don't figger that ol' finnigler can stop us nohow. Judge, I can see a skyscraper over where that Chinee laundry is."

Tolliver stared at the two-story building and the little Celestial who was carrying a basket of wash out. He turned to Hattie and sniffed.

"You made that batch of elderberry danged strong, Hattie. Why so stingy with it, huh?"

"Bushwash!" Hattie pushed out, and climbed aboard the Model T. "No more imagination in you than in a burrer's rump." She drove away.

THE next morning broke as rosy as the one preceding it and Hattie arrived at her office, rolling up her sleeves, and fairly gurgling with vim and vigor. She plunged into her chair and snatched up a pencil. Ten minutes later she was elbow deep in superlatives anent the honesty of the town of Milldew.

She looked up suddenly, wondered why the sun was not pouring through the window. She heard steps outside and they sounded forlorn and dispirited. They finally came up the stairs, along the corridor, and into the office. They belonged to Judge Tolliver; Milo Camby, Milldew's Chief of Police; and an apologetic, stringy citizen named Purdy Shim, collector of taxes.

"I have seen three sunnier faces in the bottoms of tar buckets," Hattie yelped. "No wonder the sun ducked behind a cloud. Unhobble your tongue, Judge. Oh, gobs, I got a feelin'—"

"We are sunk, Hattie."

"Look, I hate guessin' games, you bagabones," Hattie gulped.

"Tell her, Milo," the Judge said.

"Well," Camby said. "Brace yourself, ma'am. You know Jubal Fogg?"

"Not more'n I have to," Hattie snapped. "Got a rundown spread back of Sugarloaf. Been told he ain't paid his taxes sincet—"

Purdy Shim swallowed hard and made a sound like a green pear dropping into a tin pail.

"What is eatin' you, Purdy?" Hattie asked.

"He knows Jube did pay taxes," Judge Tolliver said in a rusty voice. "Jube come in when he heard the rumor an' he brought his son with him, Hattie. Elbie learned bookkeepin' in school. Elbie found out Purdy here is a embezzler. Jube went to Camby here an' says he wants Purdy put in jail. Milo figgered you might see Jube an' kinda squish the charges or hol' them off until—"

"Wha-a-a-a-a?" Hattie gurgled. "You plead guilty, Purdy? There is a mistake somewheres. Nobody can do this t' me—"

"I been bad, Hattie," Purdy Shim admitted. "Got into poker games at the Milldew House an'—"

"Poker games?" Hattie groaned and sagged in her chair. "A embezzler. Purdy, you polecat, you've held Milldew back fifty years. Throw him in jail, Camby. Do your duty—er—wait! Nope, I'll try an' reason with Jube Fogg whicht is as much sense as tryin' to git a cow t' spell out words. If he's got civil pride—"

"An' if Purdy skips town?" Milo Camby asked. "You'll take the responsib—?"

"Yep, an' carbolic acid too," Hattie groaned. "Say, I can make up the shortage an' everythin' will be awright, huh? What did we git excited for, huh?"

"Maybe 'cause Jube took the tax books," Judge Tolliver said. "An' threatens t' send fer the examiner if we don't prosecute Purdy inside thirty days."

"We are stalemates," Hattie sighed, and the bird on her hat shed three more feathers and dropped its head into the clump of cherries, out of sight. "I will go an' see Fogg. Don't you dast leave Milldew, Purdy Shim, or I will foller you t' the ends of the earth until I hunt you down, an' I'll think up slow torture 'fore I kill you. Pete told me once how a Mex— Git out of here, an' if anybody blabs, there will be a murder added t' Milldew's list of crimes. Milldew either stays lily-white or she goes whole hog in the depths of degravation. I am a desperate woman, gents!"

"I wisht I was dead," Purdy moaned, clutching his head with shaking hands.

"You never was closter to bein', dearie," Hattie said as she hurried out.

AN HOUR later she rolled her Model T up to a gate over the top rail of which Jube Fogg was leaning, a big corncob pipe in his teeth. Jube had a little egg-shaped head, a wiry mustache and an ornery disposition. There was a knowing gleam in his beady eyes.

"Howdy, Hattie. What brings you t' the Pothook, jus' as if I didn' know?"

"Jube," Hattie said. "Le's stop kiddin' around, huh? You know what is at stake in Milldew. Them tax books, now. Purdy Shim agrees t' make restitution an'—

"They're yourn, Hattie."

"Huh? Say that again, Jube, as me left ear has been botherin' me lately."

"On one condition," Jube said.

"I shoulda known," Hattie gulped. "How much do you want, you ol' bandit? Up t' where I can just excape bankrupture?"

"Lettin' you off easy, Hattie. You know my daughter, Jennie? Kinda gittin' along, she is. Twenty-eight tomorrer. A gal should be married before she's thirty, don't you think, huh?"

"You mean—?" Hattie asked thickly. "Yep, you do. I git her married. Oh, gobs, not that, Jube. I kin offer you a piece of land—"

"Got enough of it, Hattie. You heard my terms. Git Jennie a husban' an' you git the tax books," Jube said, and glanced up at the lowering sky. "Looks like rain, huh? Better start back 'fore you git wet. An' old bird like you gits pains in the joints an'—come an' stop by ag'in, Hattie. You make up your mind, let me know, yep."

"It—it—it's a deal," Hattie said.

She saw Jennie Fogg tripping a not-so-light and certainly not a fantastic toe across the yard between the henhouse and the backdoor. Jennie had molasses-colored hair which was as stringy as a dried-out mop, and sloping shoulders and skinny legs. She wore flat-heeled shoes that were curled up at the toes and her dress had no more shape to it than if it had been draped over a snubbing post.

"You ast the impossible, Jube, you ol' gopher. Well, Milldew's fair name is worth the try. One thing, though. Tell her t' be at my office in jus' three hours!"

HATTIE PRINGLE thought of prospect No. 1 for Jennie Fogg as she drove slowly back to Milldew. Even the Model T's engine was sluggish and its battered fenders drooped like beet-tops during a thirty day drought.

"Yep," she said. "I'll start in with Eph Dilldock, that's what." She rummaged around in a compartment on the skitter-buggy's dash and got a clothespin and put it on her nose.

Eph Dilldock had a little place not far from Goose Creek. He raised truck and specialized in pigs. Eph needed a wife badly and had, on occasion, admitted it in public.

Hattie found Eph engaged in mending his swill wagon. She passed the time of day, brushed over the economic condition of the county and then came to the point.

"You oughter gen marrib, Emph—" Hattie removed the clothespin. "Know just the gal for you, too. Keeps talkin' t' me about you, how you look s' lonesome an' never have no buttons sewed on. Jennie Fogg."

"Her?" Eph sniffed. "Ain't too purty, Hattie."

"Oh, but you ain't seen her sincet she made herself over. Been readin' a woman's magazine, Eph, Jennie has. Why don't you come over fer supper tomorrer night?"

"Your house, Hattie? Huh, that's sassiety, ain't it? Well, I figger a feller oughter improve hisself. Thanks, Ma'am. Better run into town an' git me a lot of that cologne water t'day."

Hattie nodded, replaced the clothespin until she was to leeward of the Dilldock layout.

"Huh, a pushover. Maybe Milldew'll git saved yet. Soon as I kin git Jennie slicked up—oh-h-h, Jennie-ve-e-e-eve—sweet Jenny——!"

When Hattie reached town, she immediately made an appointment with Madame LeFondu, nee Aggie Fondu, Milldew's beauty specialist.

"Have the patient in pretty soon, dearie. Don't git discouraged when you see her. Fifty dollars I'm offerin' t' renervate her an' I'm expectin' a first-class job."

"You are playin' Cupid ag'in, Hattie. You sure got a magic touch. Who you marryin' the gal off to?"

"Hah, wouldn't you like t' know, M'dom? Bon sewer fer now, Maddermoselle," Hattie grinned and waddled out.

She nearly fell over a citizen who had dropped a pipe and was bent over picking it up.

"What you snoopin' aroun' Milldew fer, Appleby, you ol' flibbertigibbet? Any more crime in New Eden, that den of dishones' iniquity?"

"Pretty smug nowadays, ain't you, you ol' fat sage hen?"

Hattie swung her warbag.

"Ugh!" Adam grunted, and his pipe flew out of his mouth and plopped into a rain-barrel.

"That'll teach you t' respeck the weaker sects," Hattie snapped, and crossed the street.

Adam Appleby staggered to the porch of the Milldew House and immediately began to think of the matter of revenge. As president of the New Eden Forum for Fostering Progress, he knew results were expected.

"Permotin' another hookup, huh?" he mumbled to himself. "When she mates a pair it ain't because she jus' wants 'em t' be happy, nope. Always somethin' in it fer her or the town. Jennie Fogg, h-m-m. Jube's a church goer an' is a stickler fer the Golden Rule. I'll keep an eye on the Pothook."

That afternoon, late, Madame LeFondu still labored over Jennie. Hattie Pringle admitted she was ready to give up herself once. But when night began to fall, she discovered that her fifty dollars were not spent entirely in vain. Jennie Fogg was still no raving beauty, but she would do. "Wait'll certain fellers git a look at you, dearie," Hattie grinned. "Eph Dilldock, fer instance."

"Him?" Jennie sniffed. "The piggy man?"

"Guess you ain't seen Eph dressed up an' soaked in eau de lilacs, huh?" Hattie said. "There's a big future in cured hams. Ever hear of the Swifts family? Millionaires, Jennie, yep."

"My favorite meat is fried ham steak," Jennie nasaled, and ogled herself in the mirror. "Gee, Hattie, I look ravenous."

"Come aroun' t' supper tomorrer night, Jennie. Got a silk dress'll fit you," Hattie said. "My honeymoon dress—only wore it oncet. We kin make it over. It's time you got married, Jennie."

"You think I've fergot that?" Miss Fogg bridled. "They been callin' me an ol' maid. I'll show 'em, you wait an' see."

"That's the spirit!" Hattie said. "Stick with me, dearie, an' you'll wear a diamon'. Almost one, anyways. See you tomorrer night, Jennie."

Judge Tolliver knocked on Hattie's door

at nine-thirty that night.

"Been over t' New Eden, Hattie," he said. "Saw Appleby, an' don't like the look on his face."

"Nobody never did, even his ma."

"He's schemin', Hattie."

"You surprise me, Judge. You'd git t' wonderin' if you saw a wolf sharpenin' its teeth. Nobody's got a chancet ag'in us," Hattie said. "Go home, Judge, as I am a widder an' could git compermised."

THE romance between Jennie Fogg and Eph Dilldock became the talk of the town. Never had a Romeo, even with a balcony, made such rapid progress with a Juliet as had the pig fancier with Jube Fogg's daughter. In three days he had wooed and won and was dickering with the Milldew jeweler for a wedding ring. Jube Fogg called on Hattie when it looked as if Jennie was as good as in Eph's kitchen tossing hotcakes.

"Got t' hand it to you, Hattie," Jube said. "I'm a man of my word, yep. Just after the knot is tied, you git the tax books an' Purdy Shim kin start anew."

"Oh, it wa'n't nothin', Jube," Hattie sniffed. "It is the same all over. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yourn."

"Huh?" Jube gulped. "You work fast, don't you? A widder an' me a—you go on now, you ol' jazzabel. Nobody's safe when you—"

"If Milldew's fair name wa'n't at stake, I'd hand you one on the beezer!" Hattie yelped. "Incineratin' I'd set me cap fer you! If I ever set anythin', it'll be a bear trap. You fog outa here, you ol' rooey!"

It happened just after Milldew had had breakfast the next morning. Adam Appleby and the New Eden sheriff came into town and barged into Hattie Pringle's office. Appleby grinned and snarled like a wolf.

"Milldew," he sneered. "Where hones' hearts beat as one. Lowes' crime rate in the State, huh? Well, we got Eph Dilldock in jail, you ol' mudhen. He stole Black Diamon', my prize hog. Yep, I missed him an' went over t' Dilldock's. There it was, right in his pen. Still there now with that black spot on its back. Everybody knows that hawg. Caught Dilldock with a pail of whitewash, jus' comin' out of his house—"

"Wha-a-a-a-a?" Hattie gulped. "Come on, you pair of coyotes. Git in this skitter-buggy. Somethin's—"

Hattie ran as fast as a woman of her girth would permit into the New Eden lockup a half hour later.

She found Eph Dilldock hunched up on a wooden bench.

"It was there, Hattie," he said. "Must of wandered off from Appleby's pens an' got into mine. Tha's all I kin figger."

Adam Appleby, Dealer in Livestock, Wholesale Butcher, President of New Eden's Forum for Fostering Progress, indulged in a fiendish triumphant grin.

"Don't look at me like that, Hattie. I am jus' an indignant citizen who is the victim of Milldew's lawless element."

"Le's go to Dilldock's. I want t' see that pig! I got a hunch, you swine swindler!" Hattie snapped.

All concerned were soon watching Hattie try to erase a black diamond patch from a big porker's back. Hattie used water, vinegar and spot remover she found in Eph's house. She labored futilely and at last sighed deeply and plumped down in a chair.

"You got me, it looks like. When's the trial?"

"Week from tomorrer," Appleby grinned. "You bring bail, huh?"

"Eph kin stew in his hog juice," Hattie howled.

Two hours later, Jube Fogg came to see Hattie in her place of business in Milldew.

"It is all off, Hattie. No daughter of mine weds a hog thief. She tol' me so, 'fore I said she never would. Well, I better git these tax books t' the examiner or write him a letter—"

"Look, Jube," Hattie said. "There is as good suckers—er—fish in Goose Creek as was ever caught. Gimme one more chancet. Look, I thought of a legible mate fer Jennie. Wendell Bunce. Better lookin' than Eph, too."

"No visible means of support, Hattie," Jube sniffed. "Feller's got t' support Jen the way she was accustomed. Nope."

"He's got a voice, Jube," Hettie yelped, thinking like lightning. "You've heard them cowboy singers on the new Victorolas? I'll git him an addition after trainin' his voice. They got a teacher in Three Falls, Jube. We'll make Wendell a cowboy crooner!"

"You got just twenty days, Hattie," Jube said. "It is a bargain. I got t' marry Jennie off as I promised her ma the las' thing—"

"Here we go ag'in," Hattie sighed loud and gustily, and went out of her office and down the stairs.

SHE drove to the Bunce place three miles from town. Wendell lived in a small white clapboard house, enjoying idleness furnished him by a small legacy left to him by an uncle in Butte. Wendell was strumming a banjo and crooning *Buffalo Gal, Won't You Come Out T'Night?* Wendell could generally be found under the big elm tree in the yard or on the banks of Goose Creek, fishing.

"Howdy, Wendell," Hattie greeted. "You got the sweetes' voice."

"You think so, huh?" Wendell's face beamed.

"Yep. An' even Jennie Fogg mentioned it only awhile ago, Wendell," Hattie said innocently enough.

"Say, she sure got herself up mighty cute, Mrs. Pringle. Didn' know her at firs'. She said that?"

"Ain't it awful lonesome here, Wendell? What you got ahead after your legacy peters out?" Hattie asked, easing her big chassis into an old canvas hammock that instantly broke. "Oops," Hattie gulped. "There goes me upper plate, Wendell. Yep, Jennie is cute. Feller'll be lucky t' git her. When times git bad, she kin do the whites' washin's I ever saw."

"Goin" t' marry the pig man, ain't she?" Wendell asked, and strummed his banjo.

"It's all over. Didn' you hear? Eph got caught stealin' a hawg from Adam Appleby," Hattie said. "I bet if you just cut loose with that voice, Wendell, you could git it on Victorola records an' git rich. There's a singin' school in Three Falls. I'd be willin' to pay your intuition as I hate t' see a voice go neglected. Look what would of happened if somebody didn't stake Crusoe. His man, Friday, fer instants."

"Hattie, you are sure the best ol' fossil," Wendell complimented. "Er, not too old as you ain't got too many gray hairs. Think Jennie would git mad if I called on her? Like you said, my legeracy can't last, an' while I was gittin' famous, Jennie could take in wash—only fer a littel while of courst—"

"We will drive to Three Falls tomorrer, Wendell," Hattie said. "Is it a deal, huh? An' I kinda am on the right side of Jennie. If I kind of put in a good word—"

"You are the salt of the earth, Hattie."

"Yep, an' if things don't turn out fer me the way they got to, Wendell, I'll be sprinkled all over the earth," Hattie gulped. "You keep mum about this, sabe?"

She got up and groped her way to her Model T.

"Sometimes, you ol' coot, an' I'm talkin' to you, Hattie Pringle, I don't see where you git the nerve, you ol' meddle-snoot. But maybe Wendell has a voice kin be trained. It is not just meself I'm thinkin' of. I wisht I could be more convincin', though."

That afternoon, a New Eden paper hit Milldew. A big headline mocked the town's citizens. PIG THIEF STAMPEDES PRINGLE PUBLICITY STUNT. Milldew's Boast of Low Crime Rate Hits Snag. New Eden Adds Lawmen In Anticipation Of Wave Of Crime!

Hattie Pringle stamped a newspaper into the mud and walked into the drugstore, realizing that Milldew was forever lost if news of Purdy Shim's embezzlement of tax funds ever leaked out.

"Look, Sam," she said to the druggist. "I'm figurin' on sproutin' a flock of gray hairs. Got anythin' t'—you know—"

"Why, just the thing, Hattie. Recently interduced t' the market. Nodley's Neverfade Hair Dye. Nothin'll take it off. Eighty-five cents the large size—figurin' on marryin' ag'in?"

"Shut your silly face!" Hattie sniffed, then got a little weak at the knees.

She thought of the pig called Black Diamond and was pretty certain Adam Appleby had indulged in a rare and slimy bit of toboggan greasing. She also knew that if Neverfade was all it was advertised to be, there was no use in trying to prove a thing on Adam.

"I bet he did," Hattie ground out. "No way of provin' it. If he had a pig the same size——Oh, gobs, I will git that renergade some day if I have t' hang fer it. Looks like it is up t' Wendell!"

Hattie drove Wendell to Three Falls the next day and ushered him into the studio of Professo Hugo Tosti, teacher of voice.

"I'm puttin' my prodigal in your charge," Hattie said. "In two weeks I'll know if I been a sucker or not. A hun'red dollars ain't alfalfa, Tosti, t' kiss goodbye. You study hard now, Wendell, an' you'll be more famous, maybe, than Bodge Roger, the famous cowboy crooner."

"The course takes three months, Madam," Tosti assured Hattie loftily. "Two weeks, pouf!"

"You throw it all into two weeks," Hattie said. "Times have changed an' we got a worl' that moves fast these days. You got paid,

didn't you, dearie? Goodbye ag'in, Tosti."

"I'll make good, Hattie," Wendell promised. "Las' night I promised Jennie. Yep, she ast me t' call on her, whicht I did. She sure has changed, Hattie."

ONCE more Milldew marvelled at Jennie Fogg's sudden popularity. People forgot Eph Dilldock and watched the new romance unfold. The Milldew *Clarion* prophesied, at Hattie's urging, great things for Wendell Bunce. His voice would be preserved on waxen discs for prosperity, an editorial said.

Meanwhile the campaign to set up Milldew as the most virtuous community in the State went on, albeit a trifle abstractedly. It was common knowledge that one citizen was ready to be tried as a pig thief. The chairman, Judge Tolliver, held the secret of Purdy Shim's shame in his leathery heart, and so the Judge did not really have it in his work.

"After all," Hattie exhorted her indolent committee one night at a hastily assembled meeting, "nothin' is perfect, huh? We didn't say we had no badmen, just less than any other town. We kin still win, feller citizens!"

"But pig stealin', Hattie," Mrs. Tolliver squeaked. "If it was only a train robbery or a murder, we could cover that up in time. But stealin' a pig—"

"Yep," Tolliver said, half asleep. "An' that tax money. Why, we won't never—"

Hattie banged the gavel down and lifted Judge Tolliver right out of his chair.

"You forgot yourself, you ol' goat! You are out of order, Judge!" Hattie took time out to mop the beads of fright water off her brow. "We ain't here t' discuss taxes. Meetin' adjourned. Oh, gobs!"

The deadline was near when Wendell Bunce arrived at Hattie's office one morning and announced that he was ready for his debut.

"I'll sing fer the town, Hattie," he said. "Then you kin judge whether you'll git me an audition with a record maker, huh? We'll hold the recital Saturday aftenoon, huh? Out in the open as the professor says he wants t' check my range."

"Don't like the sound of that, Wendell. I'll make sure he ain't got a gun. We'll make the preparations an' put out han' bills. Poor Eph, he got thirty days in the New Eden jail this mornin'."

"Serves him right," Wendell sniffed. "He got off dang lucky."

Wendell had no sooner left Hattie's office when Judge Tolliver minced in on the sides of his old boots, wiping his face with a big bandanna.

"We better work fas', Hattie," he choked out. "Adam Appleby is smellin' a rat besides hisself. Caught him talkin' t' Jube Fogg awhile ago. That gent suspects somethin'. When kin we git Wendell an' Jennie married, huh?"

Hattie felt butterflies in her stomach.

"Jennie says not until four days from now, Judge, as she ain't got her trussow finished. You git a gun an' watch that Appleby polecat. Shoot t' kill if you catch any brib'ry goin' on. Now git out, as I got t' git some han'bills printed."

Milldew was strewn with the announcements before the next day at noon. They said boldly:

DEBUT OF WENDELL BUNCE, MILLDEW'S GIFT TO COWBOY CROONING. COME ONE, COME ALL! HEAR A VOICE WHICH WILL SWEEP AMERICA. MILLDEW GRAMMAR SCHOOL STADIUM. Saturday, Aug. 16th. 3:30 P.M. Adm. .50.

Hattie Pringle sat on the porch of the Milldew House perusing one of the handbills when Jube Fogg clumped up the steps.

"Don't get too rambunctious about that Bunce feller," Jube drawled, "I ain't lettin' Jennie marry the cuss if he don't git hisself a job croonin' phonygraft records. He better make good. You know I wisht Eph Dilldock didn't pan out like he did. Kinda was partial t' the gent. Bacon's my favorite breakfas' dish."

"Wendell's got a voice," Hattie snapped.

"So've I, but it scares a houn' dog when I raise it," Jube said. "Feller named Appleby keeps askin' me questions, Hattie. Well, I ain't tellin' him right out about Purdy Shim. He kin wait until I git ready t' let it out meself. Hate t' be so cussed, but I got t' marry Jennie off. Can't keep meself, Elbie, three hun'red head of stock an' Jennie. You see how it is, Hattie."

"You are a chiselin' polecat, Jube," Hattie said. "Wendell don't make good, I am stranglin' what voice he has left an' suin' a perfesser fer false advertisin'. An' if I ever git the goods on that Appleby, he'll wisht his ma never met his pa an' he got born. I'll go down in a awful crash but certain skunks won't be amongst the survivors."

"See you at the musical, Hattie," Jube Fogg said, and took his leave.

"Oh, bushwash," Hattie sighed. "I never got into such a skillet of smelts. It would be easier gettin' out of han' cuffs an' leg-irons after gittin' throwed into Goose Creek. Me an' Hoodinny, yep. I wisht tomorrer never did come like folks say. But then we wouldn't need no calendars an'—think I'll go talk t' Pete an' rest me weary ol' bones."

SATURDAY came as usual and at three in the afternoon, the Milldew school stadium was jammed. Folks came from near and far to hear the magic voice of Wendell Bunce. The mayor arrived, tripped over third base on the ball diamond, lost his silk hat and nearly choked himself to death with his cane. The Judge and Mrs. Tolliver arrived, as did Jube Fogg and Jennie. Last but not least, Adam Appleby stepped into the box next to Hattie's and immediately threw a verbal harpoon.

"I know he can't sing better'n a bullfrog," Adam scoffed. "Why are you so anxious t' git Jennie a husban', Fatty?"

"Keep your sassy mouth closed," Hattie countered. "Or I'll fill it full of me fist. A derby hat, huh? On that thing you calls a head? I've seen better on a glass of beer. One more peep outa you an' I'll crown you with me reticule, an' it's got a flatiron in it I was takin' t' git fixed."

Wendell Bunce arrived and mounted the wooden stage that had been built over home plate. There was a piano in a dead-axe wagon and Sophie Musselshell, Baptist Church organist, seated herself in front of it, and waited.

"Funny that perfesser didn' come t' hear his star pupil," Judge Tolliver grunted and glanced toward Hattie. "I got a funny feelin' that—"

"Shut up," Hattie snapped. "Or you'll git one that ain't funny. Shut up, as they're denouncin' Wendell."

They introduced Wendell as the protege of Milldew's foremost music lover, Hattie Pringle, and then called him the coming sensation in range crooning.

His first number was going to be *The Cowboy's Lament.*

Miss Musselshell began to play. Wendell opened his mouth and let go. Hattie's old hat skidded to the back of her head and a cigar flew out of the mayor's mouth.

"Oh-h-h-h-h-h, ba-a-ry me not on the lo-o-o-one prar-r-r-r-r-r-eeeeeee! Jus—"

There was no doubting the fact that Wendell had a voice. In fact he had four times as much lung power as the average mortal and his voice was a cross between an ocean liner's foghorn and the howling wind of a January blizzard. Old Ben Cuppy, who had worn an ear trumpet for thirty years, grinned wide, and threw the instrument away. People in the front seats stampeded to get out of the big wind.

Wendell's voice was as unbeautiful as it was loud. Dogs scampered out of the stadium and from somewhere off in the hills came a coyote's protesting yowl.

"Adios, Hattie," Jube Fogg said. "You tried danged hard."

"You think I'd marry that person?" Jennie tossed at Hattie as she made her exit. "He'd scare my children t' death!"

"I wouldn't think of leavin'," Appleby yelled. "I will set here an' enjoy life at its fullest, yep."

"Stop Wendell!" Hattie screeched. "He'll scare all the milk outa all the cows in the township! Oh, gobs, all is ruint. Milldew's shame'll come out—!"

A cabbage finally convinced Wendell Bunce that his musical career was cut short just after birth. The muskmelon intended for him, knocked a wig off Miss Sophie Musselshell's pate, and Adam Appleby and New Eden citizens writhed in convulsions of mirth.

"Where's the cops?" Hattie screamed. "Tell Milo Camby t' git order here or he kin bet he won't git elected ag'in as long as he lives!"

She saw something coming and ducked. It hit Judge Tolliver behind the ear and made a squishy sound. It was an egg that had long since curdled.

"Fifty cents fer this show," Appleby roared. "It's worth a dollar an' a half. More! More!"

Hattie lunged at him and pulled his derby down over his eyes, then thumped the crown of it with her fist.

"You'll laugh, hah?"

She booted Adam Appleby in the seat of his pants and the New Eden citizen went diving out onto the baseball diamond. Then people gasped. Some of them shouted. Hattie stared toward the gate. Pigs were coming on the run. All kinds of porkers. One big sow was trying to scale the fence. There were big and little and middle-sized pigs, white pigs and black pigs and multi-colored hams very much on the hoof!

AND the pigs kept coming. There must have been a good two hundred pigs in the stadium, all grunting and squealing with evident porcine delight. They converged on a frantic Wendell Bunce.

"Git it, Judge?" Hattie howled. "Wendell is the champion hawg caller of the Universe an' didn't know it. He'll win prizes at country fairs an' git rich. Where's Jube?"

"Chase 'em!" Wendell screamed. "They'll eat me up, Hattie! Hattie—ha-a-alp!"

Hattie Pringle was not even mildly interested in Wendell's plight. She had singled out two pigs, the largest of the visitors that had answered the call. They were about the same size. Both had a black diamond patch on their backs.

"Judge," Hattie yelped. "Them two pigs got away, come from different places. One belongs t' Adam Appleby—both belong t' the skunk, by gobs! He fixed one up with hair dye an' framed Eph fer the hoosegow! Somebody git that New Eden smarty pants. Don't let him git away! He was s' tight-fisted an' mean he didn't plant his prize pig as he wanted t' keep his cake an' have Eph eat it too. Looks like we got him hooked. There he is! Grab the sidewinder!"

Milo Camby and Judge Tolliver seized Adam Appleby and hustled him over to where two of Milldew's citizens were trying to coax two big pigs away from the prostrate figure of a terrified Wendell Bunce.

"I believe the darlin's are tryin' t' kiss him," Hattie said, then whirled on Adam. "Look, you crooked yahoo! Two pigs with the same markin's. Where did you keep the real Black Diamond hid, you polecat? Well, Wendell's voice give it strength enough t' break loose, huh? Arrest him in the name of the law, Milo!"

"Huh? That voice even got it loose from the cellar?" Adam yipped without thinking. "Only one winder in it an' it's nine feet from the floor an' it was locked. Er—what am I sayin'? Don't you hit me, you fat cowbird, Hattie Pringle. I did it. I confess. I'll put in a counter suit fer assault if you throw that big rock!"

"Yep," the Judge said. "Put it down, Hattie, as the kids need secont base. The mangy critter owned up. Git a posse t' go after Eph Dilldock an' bring him back t' his loved ones, Milo. A hog callin' fool, this Wendell. He kin support Jennie now an'—"

"He will not!" an asthmatic voice cut through the confusion. "Eph is innercent an' my firs' love. I am goin' t' him an' ask fer forgiveness. Oh, my poor darlin'!"

"Looks like all Adams are alike. One give Ol' Eden a bad name," Hattie said and shoved Appleby toward the law's stoutest limb. "This one has about ruint New Eden. It'll be quite an eve in Milldew t'night, huh? Hey, Jube!"

"I'm here, Hattie," Jennie's pa said. "You did it, you ol' rip. Be callin' on you this evenin'. Sure glad it is goin' to be Eph Dilldock. Ah, I kin hear that bacon sizzlin' every mornin'—an' spareribs, Hattie! Come over fer dinner some night, huh?"

"Lowest crime rate in the State," Judge Tolliver grinned. "Most hones'—"

Hattie shuddered.

"Look, Judge, le's not take that campaign too serious, huh? It ain't much fun bein' too honest. We'll ballyhoo it a little more an' then kind of ease up, huh? When a body gits braggin' about how good somethin' is, it turns out bad.

"After all, Judge, nobody should brag about bein' good as that is what the Lord expecks of us anyways. We had a narrer excape an' I couldn't live through another. I'm goin' over t' me office an' cuss me corns. Be sure you perfer charges legal ag'in Adam. Eph kin colleck plenty from the crumb fer false conviction an' nol prosser or ipso factus or somethin' like that."

Hattie was cooling her bare feet on the window sill of her office when Jube Fogg came in with the tax records.

"I never go back on my word, Hattie," he said. "Here's the evidence ag'in Purdy. Huh, always lookin' at that ugly pitcher. What did Pete have I ain't got, huh?"

"Me," Hattie Pringle said. "An' you never will."

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NEXT ISSUE

BUTTERFLY RUSTLERS

Another Hilarious Hattie Pringle Story

By JOE ARCHIBALD

"Yes'm," Chet replied frankly. "When the right man comes along, a woman changes mighty quick"

A Complete Romantic Novelet

Tilda of the

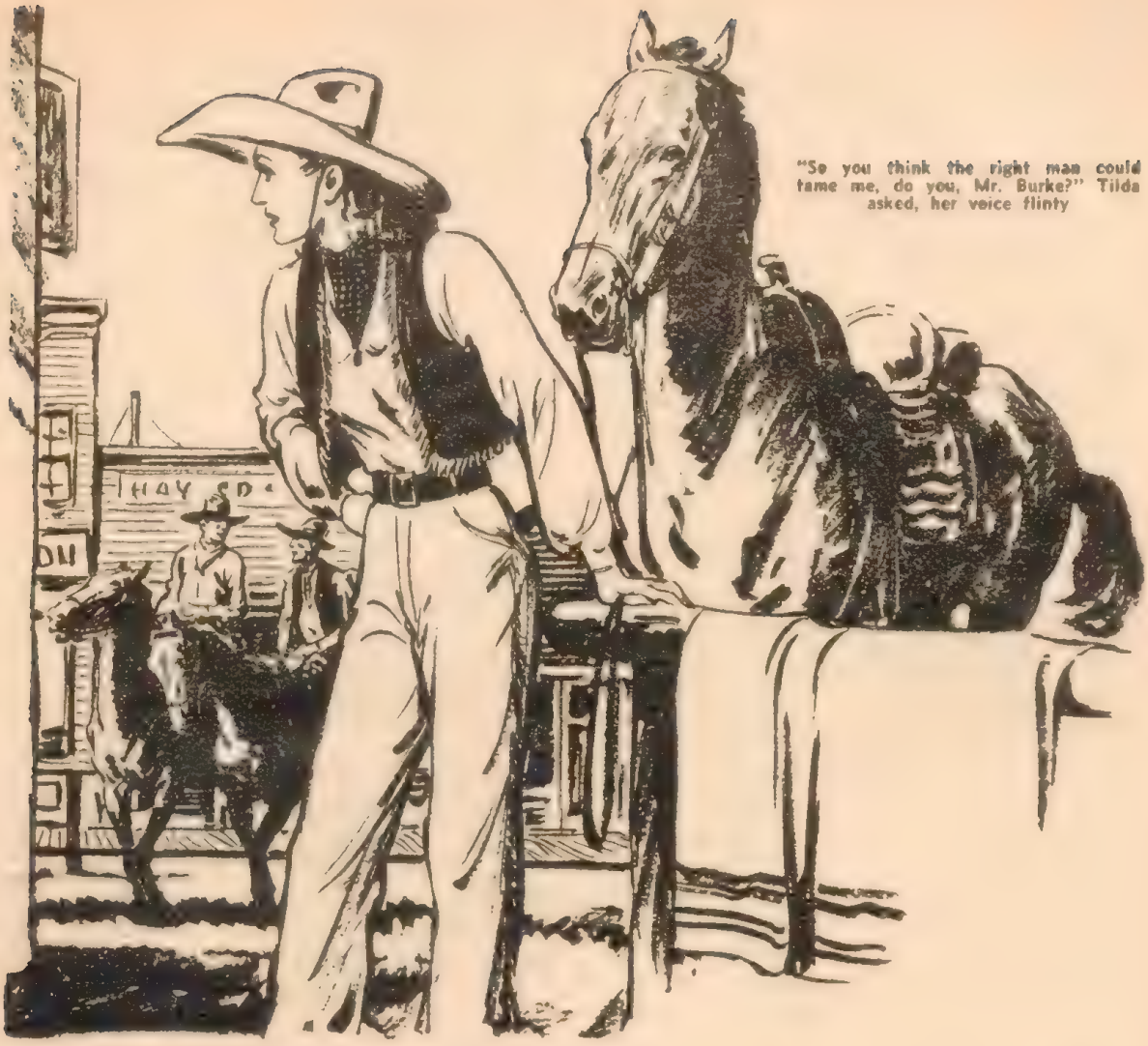
CHAPTER I

Box D Pay-day

SHOUTING and shooting, the Box D bunch came rushing into the town of Sandy Bend for the monthly pay-day spree. They arrived shortly before the hour of nine, as if timing their arrival to the opening of the bank. They ran their lathered ponies off the trail and into the street, a wild bunch on the usual monthly tear—and at their head rode Tilda.

She rode her favorite pinto, who raced with his ears back and his nostrils distended. Ten other lathered ponies bearing cowpunchers were behind him. Tilda bent forward slightly in her saddle. She was yelling with the men, and her pearl-handled six-gun was tilted skyward as she fired wildly to let the citizens know that the Box D had come to town.

A Gun-Fast Mystery Man Sides the Girl Boss



"So you think the right man could tame me, do you, Mr. Burke?" Tilda asked, her voice flinty

Tomboy Spread

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Tilda was a rather tall blonde, and well-built. She was twenty-one. She was vivacious and attractive more than beautiful. Dressed in buckskin riding breeches, a blue blouse with a buckskin jacket over it, fine riding boots, and a wide-brimmed felt sombrero kept on her head by a chin strap, she made a pretty picture as she rode.

Tilda owned the Box D, and had since the death of her father two years before after a lingering illness. She had refused to sell the outfit. With the aid of Hank Edmonds, her father's old foreman, she ran it. Nor was there anything so unusual about that. She knew ranch work as well as any man.

Tilda's father had hoped for a son, and had received a daughter. His wife had died within two years of Tilda's birth. So John Dorson had raised Tilda after the manner of a boy. As soon as she was able to cling to a saddle, she had a pony to ride. As she grew older, she learned to ride wild stock, to rope

of the Box D in a Roaring Cowtown Feud!

like an expert, and shoot like a natural marksman. She knew all the tricks of the trade, did Tilda Dorson, and she was proud of the Box D.

It always had been a rough outfit. The bunkhouse crew did not count a weakling among them. A feud of many years' standing with Harvey Oakes and his X Dash outfit had been responsible for that.

The others in the Valley called the Box D the "Tomboy Spread." For Tilda ruled the outfit now with a hand of steel. No man could fool her as to ranch or range work. She was firm, but fair in her dealings with the men. They admired and respected her for her ability. You could get a fight out of a Box D man any time by suggesting that it must be obnoxious to work for a woman boss.

Now, the bunch rode madly past a row of cottages, sending clouds of fine dust toward them. They dashed into the small business section, passing the blacksmith shop first. Standing in the doorway there was a tall young stranger, and Tilda got a glance at him as they rode past. That was something to check on later, she thought. Possibly Harvey Oakes was importing a gun-fighter.

IN FRONT of the bank they skidded their ponies to an abrupt stop just as the banker was opening the door. Dismounting, laughing and shouting, they tethered their ponies to the hitch-rail there, got upon the walk and kicked the dust from their boots, and followed Tilda into the bank.

"Howdy, Mr. Lewiston!" Tilda greeted the banker. "Here we are again. Here's the list. Pay these galoots so they can hurry out and spend their money."

"Hello, Tilda," Lewiston greeted cordially. "I could hear you and your boys coming a mile away."

"We like to exercise our ponies and blow off steam."

The men lined up to get their pay according to the pay slip Tilda had given Lewiston. Tilda leaned against the wall and watched them proudly. They were her men!

There was Hank Edmonds, grizzled and wrinkled now, who had been her father's foreman for years. Behind him was Billy Huston, the youngest puncher with the outfit, a good-looking young fellow who fancied himself in love with Tilda. There was Lou Ashe, the quarrelsome bully, a bad man in a fight. Behind him was old "Daddy" Moser, the outfit's old-timer, who boasted that he had seen the first calf born in the valley, and probably had. And the others.

As they were getting their pay, Tilda wandered to the door and looked down the street. She was remembering the stranger she had noticed standing in the doorway at the blacksmith shop. Well, she would soon learn something about him. Her pony had cast a shoe as they had entered the town, and she had a legitimate reason for visiting the blacksmith promptly.

She turned away from the door as pounding boots told her the men had their pay and were about to leave.

"Behave yourselves, now," Tilda said, and laughed while they responded with grins. "Anybody so drunk he can't climb into his saddle and start for home at sunset will be fired! Don't shoot out too many windows, because I always have to pay for them. Leave the town men alone and don't pick fights. And keep away from that blond waitress at the restaurant. Get goin'!"

They grinned again and filed past her, to start down the street toward the saloon. But they would not spend their entire day drinking and playing poker. Some of them were sensible. They would buy things at the store, and go to the restaurant for a midday meal, and buy hard candy to take back to the Box D with them.

Tilda watched them a moment, then untied her pony and swung up into saddle. With the pony at a walk, she went back down the street. His hoofs made little noise as they struck into the deep velvety dust.

As she neared the blacksmith shop she could hear Ed Carew, the blacksmith, talking to the stranger.

"She's a great girl," Carew was saying, "but as wild as yuh'll find 'em. They call the old Box D the Tomboy Spread, and Tilda is the tomboy. But she has her troubles. Harvey Oakes of the X Dash didn't stop the feud when Tilda's father died."

"Mean to say this Harvey Oakes would fight a woman?" the stranger cut in. Tilda liked his drawling voice.

"He's fightin' a ragin', r'arin' outfit. It only happens that a girl is the boss of it now. I've told yuh all about the old trouble. If yuh're lookin' for a job, yuh can't do better than the Box D."

"I'll do some thinkin' about it," the stranger replied.

"Yuh needn't be scared of Tilda."

"Oh, I'm not. Maybe she's wild, but when the right man comes along he'll tame her quick enough."

"A few jaspers have tried to make up to her, and got their ears burned off," Carew informed him.

"I said the *right* man."

Tilda had dismounted quietly and led her pony to the wide open doorway. Now her shadow darkened it.

"If you two gentlemen are through concerning yourselves with me and my affairs, maybe you can attend to business, Ed Carew," she snapped, her eyes flashing. "My pony's thrown a shoe. Fix him up."

"Shore, Tilda, shore," Carew replied hastily, gulping in embarrassment. "I was just tellin' Mr. Burke about the folks in the valley. He came ridin' in yesterday, and he's a stranger here. Mr. Chet Burke is his name."

Tilda turned to look at Chet Burke. He was standing stiffly erect. Tall and slender, with dark hair and eyes, a capable-looking man of perhaps thirty, Tilda judged. She looked him up and down as if he had been a horse offered for sale.

"So you think the right man could tame me, do you, Mr. Burke?" she asked, her voice a trifle flinty.

A WISP of a smile appeared on his lips:

"Yes'm," he replied frankly. "What I meant, ma'am, is this—sometimes a woman acts manlike in her ways, and seems to be rough and all that, but she never forgets that she's a woman. And when the right man comes along, she remembers it more than ever, and changes mighty quick."

"Do you think perhaps that you might be the right man?"

"Haven't been thinkin' about that at all," Burke told her.

"Lookin' for a job?" she asked.

"Maybe so."

"All right. There's an empty bunk in my bunkhouse. We'll start for home at sunset."

"Whoa, now!" Burke protested. "I haven't said yet that I'd take the job, Miss Dorson."

"No? Could it be possible, Mr. Burke, that you already have one—with Harvey Oakes of the X Dash? The way your holster hangs and the position of your gun show me you know how to sling lead and do it quick."

"I reckon I do," Burke admitted. "I've been accused of being right good at it."

"It's entirely possible—me knowing the cuss well," said Tilda, "that Oakes is importing a gun-fighter. Do you want a job with the Box D, or not?"

"I'll think it over, ma'am, and let you know before sunset. I haven't been in Sandy Bend long enough to know my way around. Me, I never jump at anything. I've found that the man who jumps into things too quick generally finds he's jumped right into trouble."

"If you sign on with Harvey Oakes as a gunman, you'll jump right into trouble, all right!" Tilda warned. "We've been having things a little quiet lately, what with the sheriff making the two outfits pay off on different dates to keep Oakes' boys and mine apart. And no imported gunman is going to start a ruckus!"

She gestured toward Ed Carew and her pony, and turned to hurry down the street. She walked with a snappy stride that denoted a measure of anger and made her sombrero bob every time one of her boots struck the ground.

CHAPTER II
Unwilling Cowhand

AT THE store, Tilda made several purchases and ordered them put into a bundle so one of the men could carry it on his saddle. She visited a couple of housewives in the town and remained at one place for the mid-day meal, exchanging gossip. Though a tomboy all her life, Tilda was a favorite with the women.

Down on the street, the men of the Tomboy Spread were having their usual fling. They patronized the saloon, played some poker, bought stuff at the store, and dozed at intervals. It was late in the afternoon when Tilda went back to the store to buy something she had forgotten.

Chet Burke was standing in front of the barber shop, in which old Daddy Moser was getting his whiskers trimmed. Tilda eyed Chet as she neared him. He turned and saw her, and touched the brim of his hat by way of salute.

"Made up your mind yet whether you

want to work for the Box D?" Tilda asked.

"Not yet. It isn't sunset yet, either. I said I'd let you know by sunset."

Tilda braced her fists against her hips.

"You're afraid," she said. "You know I heard you tell Carew that the right man could tame me, and of course you were thinking of yourself as the right man. And you know you couldn't make good, so you won't take a job on the Box D."

Chet grinned at her. "Now," he said, "you're tryin' to make me work for you with a line of talk like that. Why do you want me to work for you?"

"I need a good fighting man. And if you're working for the Box D, you won't be working for the X Dash. We can use a gunman as well as Harvey Oakes can."

"If I take a job," he said, "it'll be as a cowhand, not as a gun-fighter."

"So I have to wait until sunset to get an answer?" she asked. "When it comes, it'll pobably be 'no'. First time I ever begged a man to work for me. Most would break their necks to unroll their blankets in the Box D bunkhouse."

She started to say something more, decided against it, tossed her head and glared at him, and went on along the street toward the store.

This Chet Burke disturbed her, she decided. While she had been visiting the town women and eating dinner, a vision of him had been before her constantly, and she could even imagine hearing the sound of his voice. Maybe it was a warning, she thought. She was a great believer in intuition. Maybe some unknown force was telling her to beware Chet Burke. That, of course, to her way of thinking, could mean only that he was destined to work for Harvey Oakes, that he was a gunman who had been ordered to report. Possibly he was in town now to spy on the Box D men.

She saw Lou Ashe, the bully of her outfit, emerge from the saloon, and beckoned him.

"Notice that stranger in front of the barber shop?" she asked. "He's got me worried. Offered him a job, and he's slow to take me up. When we leave for home at sunset, he's to go along. Understand?"

"He'll go along," Ashe promised her.

"Be careful. I think he's a lead-slinger. But get some of the boys and grab him just before we leave, unless I tell you differently before that. His horse and outfit are in the town stable. Got it?"

"I've got it, Tilda," Ashe said, grinning. "I'll get some of the boys, and we'll corral and hogtie the buzzard. We'll try to make his acquaintance and have him in hand before sunset."

"Understand one thing," Tilda said. "I don't want him roughed up. I've got a reason behind this. Just grab him without hurting him, get his horse, put him in the saddle and see that he stays there until we get home."

Ashe grinned and turned back toward the saloon to pick out some of the men to help him. Tilda went on to the store to make her last-minute purchase and gossip with some women customers who had dropped in.

It was an hour before sunset when she emerged. She meant to go to the blacksmith shop and get her pony. Lou Ashe and young Billy Huston met her on the walk.

"The cuss wouldn't make up with us at all," Ashe reported. "Tried to buy him a drink, but he said he didn't drink with strangers. Wouldn't play poker, either. Mysterious cuss."

"Where is he now?" asked the girl.

"Just got himself a haircut, and he's in front of the barber shop again."

"All right!" Tilda said, her eyes snapping. "When you see me come riding back, grab him. Watch yourselves! He may be right handy with a gun, and even with his fists. Pretend you're getting your ponies."

"His pony is at the stable, all right, and after we grab him we'll make the stableman saddle the nag and lash him in the saddle. We'll handle it, Tilda."

She marched along the walk, going toward the blacksmith shop. Chet Burke was standing in front of the barber's place again, whittling a stick.

"Make up your mind yet?" Tilda asked him.

"Yeah. Thanks for your offer, ma'am, but I ain't takin' it up right now. I'm resting a few days and figuring out the situation in the valley. If I decide to work for your Box D, I'll come riding out in three, four days. If you've found a man meanwhile, it'll be all right."

TILDA had a feeling of disappointment, and couldn't understand it. Men usually came around begging to work for her. Usual wages, but the best grub in the valley, and plenty of men to share the work. She glared at Chet again and marched on to the blacksmith shop.

Her pony was ready. Tilda chatted with the blacksmith and tried to pump him about this Chet Burke, but the blacksmith knew nothing. He had come riding into town the afternoon before, and didn't talk much. Had a good pony and a fat blanket-roll. Seemed to have plenty of pocket money. Didn't drink much and refused to play cards.

Tilda swung to her saddle and looked down the street. That was a signal. She saw the Box D men come up the walk in a body, talking and laughing.

"There's the boss, ready to hit for home," she heard Lou Ashe say. "Let's get our ponies."

They came swaggering on toward where Chet was standing in front of the barber shop. Their ponies were at the rail in front of the bank just across the street. They had been there all day except when the men had taken them to the watering trough and given them a noon feed.

Tilda rode toward them slowly, watching. In an instant Chet Burke, she saw, found himself in the center of something like a cyclone. Legs and arms were flying in every direction. Tilda saw one of the men shot out of the group to land in the dust of the street.

Then they had Chet down, and when they lifted him again and slapped his hat on his head his wrists were tied in front of him. Three of the men forced him along the walk. Another ran to the stable to pay Chet's bill and get his pony and blanket-roll. The stableman thought it was a bit irregular, but knew better than to oppose men of the Tomboy Spread when they were on a rampage.

Tilda waited until Chet had been lashed in his saddle and the reins put into his hands. Even with his wrists tied, he could handle his pony. He was quiet, not howling maledictions. Tilda motioned, and wheeled the pony to start for home. The others followed, bringing their prisoner.

She did not look back until they were a mile out of town, and then only because she heard hoofbeats behind her. Lou Ashe and Billy Huston were riding to catch up with her.

"He's some scrapper, but wasn't lookin' for trouble," Ashe reported. "We got him without much of a fuss."

"What did he say?" she wanted to know.

"Said the Box D must need a puncher mighty bad to kidnap one. Didn't do any cussin'. Said you needed tamin'."

"Oh, he did?"

"Yeah. He's quiet now. Maybe he thinks he's storin' his rage and waitin' his time. He'll probably jump on me for this, first chance he gets. I'll be watchin'. If he makes a move at me, I'll slap back his ears."

"Aw, Tilda, what yuh want to mess around with the critter for?" Billy Huston put in.

"I've got my reasons, Billy. Had an idea he might have been one of Harvey Oakes' hired men."

"In that case," Billy said, "he'd have jumped at the chance to work for you, thinking he'd be on the inside and could spy."

"Maybe not," she replied. "He may have had other plans. You boys go back and keep watch on him. What did Hank Edmonds say?"

Tilda was always afraid of going too far in her ecapades and getting criticism from her fathers' old foreman, a man she respected greatly.

"Hank just laughed and said it wasn't any of his business," Ashe reported. "Said if you was crazy about a man that was one way to get him."

"Oh, he did?" Tilda said threateningly. "You wait till I have a minute alone with Hank! Tell Daddy Moser to come ride with me."

They rode back, and the old-timer galloped forward and jogged along beside her. He had known Tilda from the day of her birth. She went to him in confidence with her troubles, or to Ma Finch, the old housekeeper. Both gave her valuable advice.

The sunset turned to the soft dusk, then a bright moon peeped above the hills. They rode on, silent except when some of the men sang snatches of song. And finally they loped down the lane at the Box D and stopped at the house corral and dismounted. Chet Burke was untied and lifted from his saddle.

"Turn his pony into the corral," Tilda ordered. "Take him to the bunkhouse and make him comfortable. Take him with you to the grub shack and let him fill up. Don't let him get hold of a gun. Watch him tonight. I'll talk to him in the morning, but I'll say a few words now."

She strode forward, slapping her leg with her riding quirt. For a moment, their eyes met. Chet grinned slightly.

"Well, here you are on the Box D," Tilda

said. "I'm putting you on the pay-roll now. Make yourself comfortable. Hank Edmonds, my foreman, will handle you the same as the other men. Only don't try to get away. You've got a job to do here. You're going to tame me—remember?"

CHET BURKE put up no resistance. The following day he accepted orders from Hank Edmonds and did the work expected of him, and for days after that. Acting on Tilda's order, Hank always kept another man with Chet. But nothing suspicious happened.

It was a disappointment to some of the men, especially Lou Ashe. They had expected Chet to put up a battle or try to escape. And the way he went about his duties with a whimsical smile on his face had them bothered. He acted like a man who knew a secret they did not.

Tilda avoided him those first few days, but she talked about him considerably to Ma Finch and Daddy Moser.

"You're getting mighty interested in that young man, Tilda," Ma Finch told her, as she prepared pie crust.

"I'm not. It's just that I can't make him out. He's a puzzle.'

"When a girl starts to solving a man puzzle, she's half-way to the altar," said Ma. "She'll marry the critter and spend a lifetime with him just trying to solve him."

"You hush that kind of talk, Ma!" Tilda exploded.

Daddy Moser reported to her: "He does his work, but he's kind of crude in some things, like he wasn't a good general all-around ranch hand. He shore can ride, though, and rope quite some. Ain't seen him sling hardware yet, though Hank Edmonds let him have his gun."

Chet had been there about ten days before Tilda even spoke to him, though she did a lot of watching from the distance. Then there came an afternoon when the men came riding in from the range and were turning their ponies into the corral, and Tilda left the house and started walking toward them. Daddy Moser had warned her that Ashe was commencing to taunt and belittle Chet, as he always did a new man, trying to pick a fight and show himself the boss of the bunkhouse.

Tilda was watching some calves in the distance, but jerked her head around quickly when she heard loud voices. Ashe was standing in front of Chet with his fists planted against his hips and his body balanced on the balls of his feet, a position for a quick attack.

"Ashe, you've been picking on me for days," Tilda heard Chet say in a soft drawl, without the least excitement in it. "It's time for you to quit. You're aiming to pick a fight. I've seen bunkhouse bullies like you before."

"So I'm a bunkhouse bully, am I?" Ashe howled.

"That's my opinion."

"I'll soon make you change it!"

Ashe launched himself forward as he spoke, his fists swinging. But this time he did not catch a victim entirely off guard, as he did usually. Chet sidestepped with the swiftness of a rattlesnake preparing to strike and let Ashe charge past. And when Ashe came charging back he was stopped with a fist in his face.

Then they were facing each other, toe to toe, and hammering it out. Tilda went forward a short distance and leaned against a tree to watch. She never interfered in the quarrels of the men.

She had seen plenty of fist fights, and gun-fights, too.

Daddy Moser came to her. "Ashe has been askin' for it," Daddy squeaked. "Hope Chet trims him good. It's time Ashe was taken down a peg."

"What is the quarrel about?" the girl asked.

"Nothin' much. Ashe has been pickin' on him and blamin' him for this and that, just pickin' a fight."

"He's getting one," Tilda observed, as she saw Ashe reel back from a blow. "What do you think of Chet Burke, Daddy?"

"He's a man for my money. Seems balanced. Quiet. Don't gripe about everything, like some of 'em do."

"Does he ever say anything about himself?"

"Not much, and I reckon he opens up to me more'n to any of the others. I gathered that he'd been workin' somewheres down along the Border."

"Do you think he's an X Dash man, maybe a spy of Harvey Oakes?" Tilda asked.

"If he is," said Daddy Moser, "he's mighty clever about it. He don't talk much. Never asks any questions except about his work."

CHAPTER III
Disturbed Lady

LOU ASHE was trying to batter Chet down now, Tilda saw, but this time something went wrong with Ashe's system. Chet refused to be battered down. His face had been cut, for he had not escaped damage entirely. But Ashe was in a worse condition.

Hank Edmonds, the foreman, glanced toward Tilda as if for orders to stop the fight, but she shook her head. Ashe bored in again. Tilda could hear the thud of Chet's fists as he got inside Ashe's guard. Then the bunkhouse bully suddenly sank to the ground and sprawled.

Tilda started forward, but stopped abruptly when she saw Chet whip his gun out of its holster.

"Get up!" he told Ashe. "Help him to his feet, somebody."

Two of the men helped Ashe up, and one threw a bucket of water on him, carrying the water from the nearby well. Ashe shook his bloody head.

"You listen to me, Ashe!" Chet ordered. "You've been wantin' a fight, and you've had one. That ends it, far as I'm concerned. I know men like you. Don't bear a grudge against me, Ashe. And don't try any stuff with yore gun. You watch."

Chet looked around, still holding the six-gun down at his side. Down at the corner of the bunkhouse was an empty oil tin. It was a trifle too far for usual effective gun-shooting. But Chet swung up his gun and let fly.

Four blasts roared almost as one. The empty can was smashed up against the rock foundation of the bunkhouse.

"Somebody get it," Chet suggested.

Billy Huston ran and got the can. Four holes were in it so close together that a playing card could have covered them. And at that distance.

"Watch again!" Chet ordered Ashe.

He ejected the spent cartridges, put in fresh shells, and slapped the gun into its holster.

"You see the left gate post on the corral, huh?" Chet asked. "And in this opposite direction you see the ranchhouse bell, don't you? Watch!'

He stood quiet a moment, then his right hand flashed. The gun cleared leather with a speed that astounded the watchers. It roared twice. A chip of wood flew from the corral post, and the second bullet rang the bell in the opposite direction.

"I'm not aimin' to brag," Chet said quietly. "I'm just showin' you, Ashe. You'd better think twice before you come gunning for me. That's all!"

Then Tilda signaled, and the old foreman stepped forward.

"That's enough!" Hank Edmonds snapped. "Break it up. A couple of yuh take Ashe to the bunkhouse and help fix up his face. And you better—" he started to say to Chet.

But Tilda motioned again and hurried toward the group as Ashe was led away between two of the men. She stopped beside Chet and looked him up and down.

"Pretty handy with your fists, and also with a gun, Mr. Burke," she said. "That's the kind of a man I want on the Box D. Come up to the house and let Ma Finch fix your face."

"I can do that in the bunkhouse, thanks," he said.

"You'll do as I say," ordered Tilda. "You keep away from Ashe until you both cool off. Come with me."

He walked along beside her, a little shaky yet from the fight. She eyed him, but said nothing. In the kitchen, Ma Finch got salve and a clean cloth and applied the salve to his face, and gave him a piece of fresh meat for his swollen eye. Having done that, she hurried to another part of the house to attend to imaginary duties, being a wise old lady.

"How do you like it on the Box D?" Tilda asked.

"It's a mighty fine outfit."

'You don't have to stay any longer, if you want to leave."

He grinned. "Shucks! I could have left any time. The gang couldn't have kept me here against my will."

"You want to stay on, then?"

"Sure—unless you fire me. I'm satisfied for the present."

"Thought you were going to tame me?" she taunted. "You havent even made an effort to speak to me."

"You're being tamed, maybe, without knowing it," he drawled.

"I certainly don't know it if I am," Tilda snapped at him.

"You know somethin', Boss?" he asked. "I'm not aimin' to be fresh when I say it,

understand. But you're a mighty pleasant and pretty girl."

"None of that now!" Tilda warned.

"I'm meaning it sincere, please understand. I've seen a lot of folks in my time, and learned to judge 'em. I like you a heap. You've got spunk, and you sure know cow-raisin' business. That's what I'm meaning to say."

"You've said it," Tilda replied, trying to make her voice hard and failing miserably. "Maybe you'd better go to the bunkhouse now. But no more trouble with Ashe. Only, you'd be wise to watch him. He'll try to get square with you some way for the beating you gave him."

SHE walked to the kitchen door with him and opened it. They went down the steps, just in time to see one of the men come riding in on a lathered and almost exhausted pony. The rider was yelling something, and Tilda started running toward the corral with Chet beside her.

"Harvey Oakes is at it again!" the man was shouting. "I found a calf that had been shot. The new fence is smashed in a couple of places. Oakes will be saying our cattle did it to get to his creek. But I found where the wire had been cut and a post rooted out. No cattle did that."

So the old feud between the Box D and the X Dash began anew.

In the morning Tilda rode out to the line fence with more than half the men. Her father had built that long fence at huge expense to separate his land from Harvey Oakes' acreage. A creek on the Oakes' land wandered within a hundred yards of the fence at that point, and Box D cattle went to water there instead of traveling a quarter of a mile to the Box D's own creek, the cattle having no sense of property lines and water rights.

Hank Edmonds rode beside Tilda, and the men were bunched behind. Ashe had been left at the ranch, but Chet Burke and Billy Huston were with the cavalcade. As they neared the place where the fence was down, they watched the terrain carefully, but could see nobody.

They dismounted and examined the fence. Without doubt, human hands had made the break to let the cattle through. Then one calf had been shot and the remainder of the cattle driven back. Hoofprints left by horses mingled with those of the cattle.

One of the men spoke sharply, and they looked up to see Harvey Oakes riding down the hillside toward the break with four of his men. Oakes was carrying a white rag fastened to a stick.

"Climb into yore saddles, everybody," old Hank Edmonds ordered. "Don't make the first move, but be ready for trouble. I wouldn't trust that sneaky Harvey Oakes as far as I could toss a bull by his tail. Known him for years and don't know any good about him."

They mounted and waited, the men with hands straying nervously near the butts of their guns. Oakes and his men rode forward slowly and stopped on the near side of the creek.

"I'm right glad you're here, Miss Dorson," he called to Tilda. "Now, you can see for myself."

"That's right, Oakes," she snapped back at him. "I can see for myself. I can see where somebody rooted up a couple of posts and cut several strands of wire so the cattle could get through. I can see horses' hoofprints among the ones the cattle left in the muddy ground. Everything is plain, Oakes."

"Are you accusin' me of playin' tricks like that?"

"I'm just tellin' you what I can see for myself, Oakes," Tilda told him. "My men are here to repair the fence, and from now on it'll be watched. I hope you had a lot of fun killing one poor little calf."

Oakes flared up at that. "I did it as a warning," he said. "It'd have served you right if we'd shot about a dozen of your steers. I'm warning you again—I'll kill any of your cattle that break through and get on my land. I need this water for my own stock. The creek's low."

"Save your breath," Tilda interrupted. "We've both been warned by the sheriff about starting trouble again. I won't start it, but if you do my boys will be right there to meet you. Good morning, Mr. Oakes. We're busy."

Oakes and his men turned their mounts and rode over the brow of the hill and disappeared. Tilda looked around at the men. She had thought Chet was right behind her, but he was not. He had remained dismounted, and was more than half concealed behind a big rock.

Hank Edmonds began barking orders, so Tilda turned to watch the men repair the fence, and forgot the incident. The men

worked hard, reset the posts, repaired the cut wire, got everything tight.

"I'm goin' to keep a guard of two men along this fence day and night," Edmonds told Tilda.

He detailed two men, named a relief for the night, and the others rode back to the ranch.

Chet was riding beside Billy Huston and talking to him, so Tilda did not speak to him again just then. She was thinking principally about possible serious trouble with Oakes' outfit. She wished the old feud could end forever. There wasn't any sense in it, she told herself. Neighbors should be neighbors.

But Harvey Oakes was a sour bachelor of middle age. Probably born sour, Tilda thought. He always had been a trouble-maker. He had had bad luck for the last few years, and his herds were not all they should be. And he blamed everybody but himself for it. . . .

For ten days, Hank Edmonds kept day and night guards along the fence near the creek. But no X Dash riders were seen except in the distance. No Oakes cattle grazed along that part of the creek.

"They'll be breakin' loose one of these days—or nights," Edmonds made prophecy. "Oakes is waitin' to catch us off guard, mebbe."

TILDA had occasional conversations with Chet Burke these days. She rode with him out to the fence one afternoon, for she wanted to look over the situation herself. He talked freely, but little of himself and his past, and Tilda could not draw him out.

That made her angry. What was the matter with him? Was he on the run from some Border sheriff, or just naturally dumb? She told herself instantly that he wasn't dumb. He was intelligent in his talk. He betrayed that he was fairly well-educated.

"You havent' been a cowboy all your life," she accused that afternoon. "You're nearly thirty at least, and if you've been a cowboy all your life you'd be a lot handier about some things. I've been watching you. You're one of these men of mystery."

Chet grinned. "You like to solve mysteries?"

"I almost forgot that you were going to tame me," she said.

"You're gettin' tamer every day, Tilda." They were calling each other by their first names nowadays.

They rode along the fence, talked to the guards, who were stationed a mile apart, and then dismounted to rest in the shade of a lone tree. Their ground-hitched ponies nibbled the sparse grass.

"You know something?" Chet asked. "I'd like to see you sometime with yore hair all fluffed out, and a dress—maybe a light blue one to match yore eyes. A soft, swaying dress."

"Oh, you would?" she said shortly.

"Yes'm. But maybe that better not happen. I'm liking you a heap as it is, and if I saw you like I said I might go loco."

She looked at him swiftly and met his ardent gaze. There was no mistaking the sincerity in it. Tilda felt herself flushing, and that maddened her.

"Keep your talk for the waitress in the Sandy Bend restaurant," she suggested.

"But she's not the kind I like," he protested. "I like you. I'm really meaning it."

"Let's mount and get riding," she snapped, embarrassed. She turned to catch up her pony.

Chet caught up his own and had to spur to catch up with her. She was calm again by the time he did, and they rode back to the ranch with few words between them. Tilda hurried to the house, and Chet went to mend a bridle.

In the house, Tilda went to her own room and threw herself upon her bed. She was disturbed. Other men had spoken softly to her, but had caused no reaction except that of anger, if they persisted. And her present reaction was not one of anger.

"I wonder if I'm falling in love with him?" she mused. "That would be a joke! Don't know much of anything about him. Be silly of me to do a thing like that just because he's good-looking. I've met a lot of good-looking men in my time, and they never caused me a shiver. Shucks!"

CHAPTER IV
Oakes' Nephew

TILDA walked to the bunkhouse in the dusk after the evening meal to have a talk with Hank Edmonds about ranch work. Chet was sitting on a bench outside the door,

smoking a cigarette and looking at the moon. He got up when he saw her coming.

"Keep your seat," she snapped at him. "I just want to see Hank."

Edmonds had a private room in the bunkhouse, for he liked to keep close watch on the men. When Tilda had concluded her business with him, she emerged to return to the house. Chet was not on the bench. Daddy Moser was waiting to walk up to the house with her. Somehow, she had a sense of disappointment.

"Tilda," Daddy reported, "I've been keepin' an eye on that young Chet, like yuh suggested. I can't see nothin' wrong with him. Mebbe a mite quiet, but that's all. He's a deep one, I reckon."

"Oh, he's all right, I guess, Daddy."

"Yuh're gettin' interested in him. I can see it."

"Stop that, now. You're as bad as Ma Flint. Keep your mind on ranch business and Harvey Oakes."

"Oakes!" the old-timer flared. "It's about time for that pesky critter to make a bad move, if he aims to make one. He's been bidin' his time, if yuh're askin' me."

"Thanks, Daddy. I'll go on to the house now. You get back and get your sleep."

He turned back, and Tilda wandered on. She walked slowly, watching the clouds swim around the moon. She couldn't understand herself. She seemed to be getting soft. She wondered how she would look in a pretty dress and with her hair fluffed up.

"Tilda!" a voice called softly.

There he was, in the shadow of the big tree at the corner of the front porch. She came to an abrupt stop.

"Hope I didn't scare you by speakin'," he said. "I was waiting here to see you alone a minute."

"About what?" she asked, trying to be stern and businesslike.

"About what I said. I—I didn't mean to be fresh. What I said this afternoon, I mean."

"That's all right. Forget it."

"But I don't want to forget it and don't aim to," he protested. "You can fire me if you like, but I've got a piece to speak. I liked you the first time I set eyes on you in town. Since I've been here, I'm liking you more and more. I meant to come to work on the Box D all the time, but wanted to hang around town and learn some things before I started. I'm right glad you had me kidnaped."

"Why tell me all this?" she asked. Her voice was shaking a little.

He moved closer, and Tilda seemed frozen in her tracks. She didn't even lift her arms.

"You can fire me and send me away," he said, "but it's the truth I'm telling you. I love you, honey. It's been growing on me day by day, how much I love you."

"Why, how—how dare you! I don't know anything about you. Maybe you're a range tramp, or a wanted man."

"Oh, I'm all right that way!" he assured.

"Modest, too," she scoffed. "Maybe the moon has made you mad."

He bent over her. "If you knew I was all right in every way, and had a right to ask a girl like you to marry me—"

"This has gone far enough, Chet. Go back to the bunkhouse. I'll not fire you—this time. But no more of this foolishness!"

Gathering her strength, she brushed past him and hurried into the house.

In bed a little later, she stretched sleeplessly. She couldn't get Chet out of her mind. She could hear his voice, see his face in the dark. It was ridiculous, she declared to herself.

And then the thought came to her—perhaps this was all a trick of his to tame her, as he said he would. Clever! That was it! She could see through it now!

So she turned over and went to sleep. . . .

It happened the next day.

Chet was one of the guards assigned to the fence, and Lou Ashe the other. When they were relieved and came riding in at sunset, Ashe made straight for the house, pulling Hank Edmonds along with him.

"Well, I've got proof now," Ashe declared. "Chet Burke was down by the creek and I was up on the brow of the hill. What'll you think when I tell you I saw Harvey Oakes ride down to the fence by the creek and have a long talk with Burke? Then Oakes rode away and Burke went back to his post."

"I can't believe it!" Tilda said.

"He's in the bunkhouse. Face him with it in front of the other men and watch how he acts. I always was suspicious of that cuss. Thought he was one of Oakes' men."

Tilda's face was grim and set as she went with them to the bunkhouse. When they entered, the men sensed something was wrong and grew silent. Chet was putting blankets into his bunk, and they called him.

IN A few words, Tilda told him what Ashe had said.

"Of course it would be Ashe," he told her, his lips twisting in the smile she liked.

"You admit you had a long talk with Oakes?" she demanded.

"Sure. Must have talked half an hour there by the fence. Why not? He's my uncle."

"Your uncle!" she cried.

"Why, you—" Hank Edmonds started toward him, but Tilda motioned him back.

"Got anything more to say, Chet?" she asked.

"Yeah. Reckon you've got an explanation due. Oakes was my mother's brother. My parents are both dead. I haven't seen Oakes since I was about ten. He never helped after my father died. My mother had a hard time getting along, but my uncle never helped."

"What else?" Tilda urged, watching his face.

"I was working down on the Border, and quit my job and thought I'd ride up this away and see what the country looked like. Thought I might take a look at my uncle, too. You met me in town and had me kidnaped, and here I've been ever since. He learned I was here, and saw me today and came riding down to talk to me. Said he knew me because I looked like my mother."

"He talked to you about what?" Tilda asked.

"Well, he told his side of the case, and said how, us being close relatives and all, I should help him. Wanted me to spy out the land over here and send him reports about everything. Planned to have me turn against you if there was a ruckus."

"That's enough!" one of the men roared. "Say the word, Tilda, and we'll handle this cussed spy! I always thought there was somethin' wrong with him. We'll give him a beatin' and load him on his pony with his blanket-roll around his neck!"

Tilda's gesture stopped him. She looked Chet straight in the eyes, and he met her level gaze.

"He's all right," Tilda decided.

"Are you crazy?" another man shouted at her. "An Oakes spy right in your own bunkhouse, and him a nephew of that pest of a Harvey Oakes?"

"I'm still owner of the Box D," Tilda said. "I'm taking a chance that Chet is all right. If anybody doesn't like my decision, he can call at the house for his time."

Leaving them dumbfounded and shocked to silence, she turned and walked to the door, stopping there to beckon Chet to step outside with her.

"I think you're loyal to me, Chet," she said. "I'm taking a chance on you. Don't make me the laughing-stock of the range."

He walked with her for a short distance.

"You can take a chance on me," he said. "All I said last night—I meant it, and I'm still meaning it."

"All right. Go back and act as if nothing has happened. Hank Edmonds will see that you're not bothered."

He turned back, and Tilda walked out. Suddenly she found Billy Huston confronting her. He had slipped out of the bunkhouse to wait until she started up to the house.

"What is it, Billy?" she asked.

"You love that jasper, don't you?" he said. "You wouldn't take such a chance trusting him if you didn't. I—I've been loving you for a long time, Tilda. But I'm not man enough for you. I'm only a boy yuh might say. I'd never fit in as your husband, even if you'd have me. I just want to say I think Chet is all right. But I'll be watching. If he turns against you I'll be on hand to help."

"Thanks, Billy." Tilda grasped his hand a moment, then hurried on to the house.

After she had gone to bed, she did considerable thinking about the situation. She admitted to herself now that she was in love with Chet Burke. And she realized what a chance she was taking, and how it must have looked to the other men.

She felt sure Chet was true and loyal. But suppose he was not? Suppose he really was playing his uncle's game? Suppose he got her to confess her love for him, then spurned her and laughed. That would be a triumph for Harvey Oakes over the Dorson clan.

"I know Chet's all right!" she told herself fiercely. "I know!"

Ma Finch eyed her in the kitchen in the morning. A girl couldn't fool Ma Finch.

"Honey, I've heard the men talking, and I've done a lot of guessing," Ma said. "You've got to make that man prove himself first chance you get. I've been watchin you fall in love with him."

"I reckon I have, Ma," Tilda confessed.

"He strikes me as being a right good young man, the kind that'd make a girl a good husband. Maybe he ain't got anything but his

pony and blanket-roll, but what's the difference? You need a man on the Box D—a man of your own, to talk things over with all the time. Hank Edmonds is getting old. The boys are all right. But a big ranch like this . . . Well, there should be a man to help you do the bossin'."

"Everything will be all right, Ma," Tilda told her.

"I'm hopin' so, honey."

AFTER breakfast, Tilda went out to see the men starting off for their day's work. Edmonds was assigning duties. Two rode away to relieve the fence guards. Some were to go on the range and others to work around the buildings. Some of the sheds were being painted, and Tilda saw Chet assigned to that work.

After the men had gone about their duties, Tilda wandered down to where Chet was working on a tool shed behind the big barn. He faced her soberly.

"I want to thank you for trusting me," he said. "Most folks wouldn't have done it under the circumstances."

"I did it because—well, Chet, because I believe some of the things you said. About loving me, I mean."

"I do, honey."

"I wish I could be sure."

"Yuh mean that if yuh were sure, it would make a difference?"

"That's all I'm saying now, Chet. I've got to think it out. I've got to know. If you fooled me—"

"I'd never fool you."

"I've got to be sure," she said, turned and fled from him to the house.

At noon, one of the fence guards came riding like a wild man toward the ranch buildings, shouting and firing his six-gun. His pony was almost done when he pulled up at the corral. By that time, Tilda and all those on the ranch had gathered there.

"Oakes has started it!" the man yelled. "He's cuttin' the fence and lettin' our critters through, and shootin' 'em as fast as they make for the water. He burned my arm with a bullet, and he's shot Jake." Jake was the other fence guard.

Somebody raced to the ranch bell and sent its brassy tone clanging out across country. The men rushed to saddle their ponies. Hank Edmonds yelled for them to come to the bunkhouse for rifles and ammunition. Six-guns would not be enough for this.

Tilda saddled her own pony, buckled on her gun, and got into her saddle.

"You stay back!" Edmonds called to her.

"Not much!" she called back. "This is my fight. I'll be where Dad would be if he was still alive and well."

They rode away from the ranch at breakneck speed, leaving only Ma Finch and Daddy Moser behind.

CHAPTER V
Tame Woman

IT WAS more than two miles to the place where the fence was being opened. By the time the Box D outfit reached it, they had strung out. They could hear a shot now and then in the distance, and supposed the wounded guard was trying to pick off some of the X Dash men.

Topping the last hill with Chet Burke and Billy Huston, Tilda could get a view of the scene. Posts had been uprooted and the fence cut in several places. The cattle had streamed through. Half a dozen steers were dead on the ground, shot.

Some of the other men came up, and they charged down the slope straight toward the fence. The X Dash men began firing. The Box D people scattered to find cover for themselves and their jaded mounts.

Tilda found herself behind a huge rock with Billy Huston sprawled on the gravel beside her.

"You keep down, Tilda," Billy urged. "You don't want any part of this. The boys'll do your fightin'."

"It's my outfit, my job to help," she said tightly.

"To keep from gettin' hurt—that's yore job," Billy said finally.

"What are they doing now?" she asked.

Billy peered cautiously around the end of the rock.

"Them X Dash jaspers are under cover, too. They've shot a couple more of our steers. I reckon this is going to be a ruckus, all right. Oakes is asking for it."

"Our boys?" asked Tilda.

"Slinging a little lead but hitting nothing, I reckon. Somebody's got to make a move soon."

"Can you see Chet Burke?"

"He's behind that ledge of rock over to the right. Got his pony safe behind it. Gettin' ready to use a rifle. . . You love him a heap, huh?"

"I reckon I do, Billy."

"Then he'd better be right, or I'll get him for you, personal. I don't aim to stand by and see you hurt."

"You're a good boy, Billy," Tilda said.

Everything was quiet now. Then they heard Harvey Oakes' voice coming down wind to them.

"Hey! You Box D men! I've got my whole crew here, and they'll swear your own guards cut the fence so your cattle could get through and start the trouble! . . . Then you came chargin' and shootin' . . . We're defending ourselves . . . Go back, or we'll do some charging ourselves!"

Nobody answered him, but Tilda was thinking about what he had said. This might explain why Harvey Oakes had been quiet for so long. Perhaps he had made up some scheme to make it appear that the Box D was at fault, some yarn to tell the sheriff.

A chorus of wild yells came down wind. Billy Huston looked around the end of the rock again.

"Godfrey, they're coming!" he yelled. "Riding out from cover and charging toward the fence. They're aiming to make a regular battle of it."

Hank Edmonds was shouting orders. His men began opening fire as soon as the Oakes men crossed the fence line. One saddle was emptied in the first firing. The Oakes men scattered to cover behind rocks, as if the move had been prearranged.

Then somebody yelled, and they emerged and came on again. Some of the Box D men were climbing into their saddles, while the others remained under cover and fired at the elusive targets. The X Dash men were keeping a hail of bullets splattering against the rocks.

Tilda had been crouching behind the boulder. Now, Billy Huston poked his rifle around the end of the rock and began firing.

"Stop that, you young fool!" Chet Burke shouted at him. "You'll draw fire to Tilda!"

Tilda was holding her six-gun, but remained prone, waiting to use it only if she must. She could hear Hank Edmonds yelling again. The X Dash men, urged on by Oakes, had taken to cover again. Tilda understood the strategy now. They made a dash to cover, firing to cover the charge, rested, made another dash. The next move would bring them to a hand-to-hand clash.

The guns were still for a moment, and they heard Harvey Oakes' voice again.

"I'm willin' to quit now, if you'll make a deal! I know Tilda Dorson is with you. She can hear me, and she can answer."

Tilda sprang up and walked into the open, with the men shouting for her to stay hidden.

"Show yourself, Harvey Oakes!" she called. "What's the deal?"

THERE was a moment of waiting, then Oakes stepped out from behind a rocky ledge.

"I'll get backing from the county seat bank and buy you out. I always wanted the Box D to add to my ranch. We don't want any women ranch owners hereabouts. You'll get a fair price."

"That's enough!" Tilda called. "The Box D isn't for sale, Oakes. If it was, I'd sell to anybody else before you. My dad built up this outfit, and left it to me. It's a heritage to be guarded. Now I'll offer a deal."

"I'm listenin'," Oakes called.

"Call off your men and send them home. We'll fix the fence again. You'll pay for the work and material, and for the cattle you've killed. And you won't make another bad move against the Box D. Agreed to that, and do it, and we'll forget all this."

"If I don't?"

"Then I reckon we'll end the ruckus right here and now, Oakes."

Oakes gave a yell and darted behind the rock. His waiting men came charging out, their horses rested. So it had been a trick, after all.

Guns began cracking again. Two more X Dash saddles were emptied. Some of the X Dash men had enough, and rushed for cover, then began to retreat. Perhaps getting killed for Harvey Oakes did not appeal to them.

But some of them, with Oakes urging, came charging on. There was a wild patter of hoofbeats as Chet Burke suddenly dashed from cover and rode madly to where Tilda was crouched behind the rock. Billy Huston began firing to cover Chet's dash.

But Billy dropped his gun, groaned, and fell back.

"Billy!" Tilda cried.

"It's—all right—only in the shoulder," he said.

Chet dropped out of saddle, holding his

rifle, and clawing at his six-gun to get it out of its holster. This would be close work, six-gun work. The other men were yelling and shooting. Oakes and three men still came on.

One of the three stopped his horse, dropped his rifle and clung to the saddlehorn, badly wounded.

"Stop shooting, or I'll shoot Tilda Dorson," Oakes was shouting at the Box D men.

He came charging on as another of his men stopped his horse and held up his hands.

"Chet!" Oakes screeched. "Chet Burke! You're my nephew! Grab that Dorson girl and hold on to her! We'll make her talk turkey!"

Tilda looked straight at him.

"It's your chance, Chet," she said. "He'd probably make you his heir."

Oakes rode around the rock at that instant —and Chet carefully shot him in the left shoulder and knocked him out of his saddle. Jumping forward Chet stood over him, gun held ready.

His eyes were blazing.

"I told you, when we talked down by the creek, that I wasn't your kind," Chet said. "You almost let my mother and me starve, and her your own sister. I'm ready to testify against you when this matter comes up for trial."

The firing had stopped entirely now. The wounded men of the X Dash outfit had crawled to cover, and the others had gone back through the fence and ridden over the hill toward Oakes' ranchhouse.

But hoofbeats came from another direction, and down upon the scene came the sheriff with a posse. He pulled up within a short distance of Tilda and the others, and his men began scattering to look over the battlefield.

"Sheriff!" Oakes called. "I'm making a complaint. The Box D men cut their own wire and let their cattle through, then accused me of having it done. They began firing at us!"

"Save your breath, you being wounded," the grizzled, stern sheriff snapped at him. "One of your men got drunk in Sandy Bend last night and told about your plans. That's how I happen to be here. And I saw most of this ruckus while we were riding down the slope. You started the charge and fighting, Oakes, and the Box D people were only defending themselves. I've warned you enough about having trouble on this range."

"I'd get away from it fast enough if I could find a buyer," Oakes said.

Chet walked over to him. "In that case, I'll buy you out," he said.

"You!" Tilda cried.

"Sure. There's something this uncle of mine don't know. When my pa died, he left a lot of mining stock everybody thought was worthless. About a year ago, they struck a new vein. I sold that stock for plenty—too late to give my mother the easy life she deserved. I can buy the X Dash for cash and have plenty left over."

"All right!" the sheriff snapped. "Nobody's been killed, and only two Box D men hurt, and not bad. Four X Dash men hurt, one bad, and serves 'em right. Sell pronto, Oakes, and we'll let you get out of the country. Refuse, and you're startin' on the road to prison soon as we can wrap up your busted shoulder."

"I—I'll sell," Oakes muttered. "Be glad to."

"Good. Maybe we can have a decent range here, then."

CHET walked away to catch up his pony, and suddenly Tilda was beside him, going to get her own.

"Chet, you really mean it?" she asked. "You'll buy him out?"

"Meant every word of it."

"And when it came to the show-down, you—you stood by me, Chet."

"Why, sure!"

"If you buy the X Dash, we—we'll be close neighbors."

He looked at her, and smiled. "Neighbors? Is that any kind of talk? I've got some ideas about X Dash ranch."

"What ideas, Chet?"

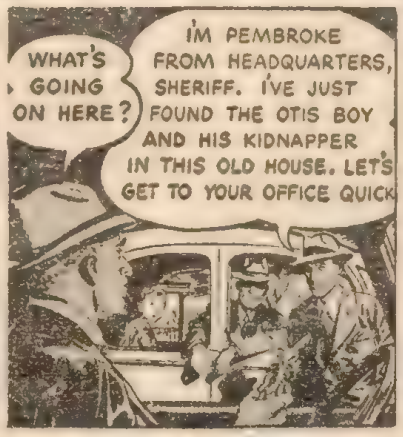
"Well, you take the X Dash and combine it with the Box D, and you've got the greatest outfit in this part of the state. We could tear down that fence and not fuss about water or anything. That is, if you'll marry me."

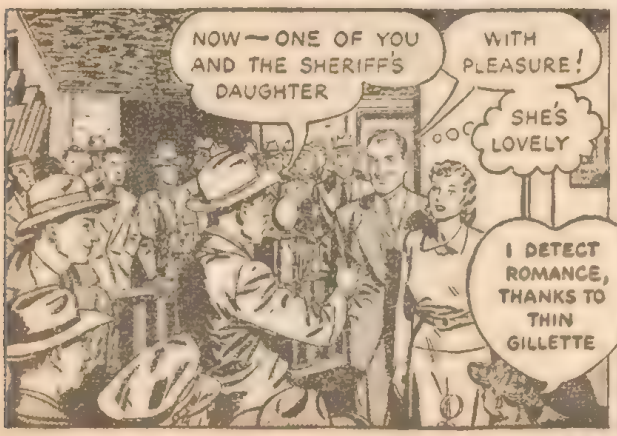
His voice had grown softer as he looked down at her. And he read her answer in the expression of her face. Regardless of those who might be watching, he clasped her in his arms and gave Tilda the kiss for which she had been hungering.

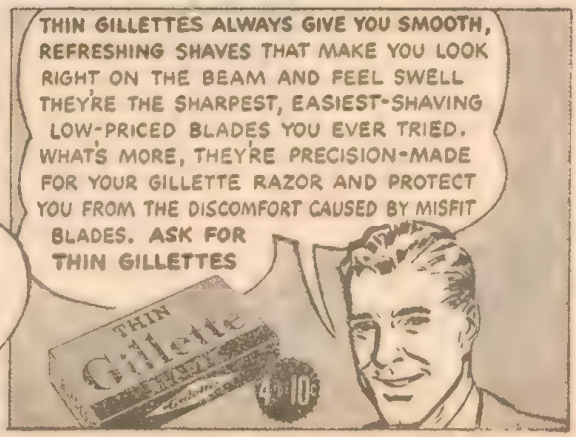
"You did it," she said, her voice muffled against his shoulder. "You tamed me."

"But I don't want you tame," Chet protested. "I want you wild—wild in love with me."

Trail Leads To Haunted House And Then . .







As the blond girl's glance rested on Jake, for the first time in Alva's life she knew swift, disturbing envy

A Complete Novelet

It Has to Be

By RUTH ANDERSON

Alva Roberts of the Flying T faces a bewildering range problem when both she and her neighbor Jake Brandon want some Big Horn grassland—and the resulting strife almost breaks her heart!

CHAPTER I

A Gray-Eyed Man—and a Blonde

ALVA ROBERTS, on a restless-eyed paint pony, watched the last of the stock being herded into the cattle cars. And as the door slammed shut her shoulders sagged in utter weariness.

She had left the Flying T long before dawn to take part in the drive into Rawlins, in spite of the foreman's protest that he and six waddies were more than enough to handle the cattle. The Flying T was her job and during the three years since her father's death she had kept it running with smooth efficiency.

Now this particular task was done, and the weariness did not matter. She nodded at Ed Higgins, the foreman, but smiling required an effort, for the muscles of her face felt stiff. She moistened her lips and, with the taste of dust in her mouth, wheeled her pony.

Almost before she saw the man at the end of the shed, her glance was caught up into his eyes. Cool, pleasant gray eyes which made her think of shade against fierce heat. His dark grave face reminded her of some-one, something.

She tried to recall what it was, but the sunlight was playing tricks by turning into flashing knives which stabbed at her eyes. The reins were sliding from her hands and as her fingers tightened, she pitched out of saddle.

She dropped into thick, swirling mists and when the mists lifted she saw the same grave face and steady, cool eyes.

"It's all right," the gray-eyed man said. "Feeling better?"

Her glance dropped to his and she liked the faint upward curve at the corners of his lips. She liked his chin, too, and decided it was pleasant to study his face like this without bothering about who he was or why he was so close to her. Pleasant and restful.

"How do you feel?" he repeated.

"All right."

"Try sitting up, ma'am."

Her glance left him and, as she took in the scene around her, she jerked erect. She was on a narrow bench in the waiting room of the railroad station and the stranger's arm was around her, supporting her. His touch had made her feel oddly secure.

"What happened?" she demanded.

"You fainted, ma'am."

"Fainted?" Her blue eyes showed disbelief. "I couldn't have! I never faint."

SHE forgot his arms and the unreal seconds when she had studied his face. She was once more Alva Roberts who was capable of managing the largest ranch in the Big Horn country and could work side by side with any man in her outfit.

"Maybe you didn't faint," he murmured. "Maybe you just got a little sleepy."

Her cheeks warmed. "It might have been the sun," she said, her words clipped. "That could happen to anyone."

"Sure."

There was a drawl in his voice, but his glance was pleasantly friendly. Restful as the touch of a cool hand.

She curved her lips into a careful, just sufficiently cordial smile because she wanted to hide a new, sudden uneasiness.

"Thank you for helping me," she said. "I'm Alva Roberts."

He took her hand, without hurry, and again the faint sense of alarm flashed through her. Deliberately she let her glance run over him and saw that in spite of his smile, the gravity was still on his face. Dressed in faded range clothes, he looked rawhide-lean and there were lines at the sides of his mouth.

"I know," he said. "You own the Flying T. I'm Jake Brandon of the Boxed O, which makes me a neighbor of yours—in a distant sort of way."

"You ought to rest, ma'am," her foreman cut in. "How about going to the hotel for a few hours?"

"That's a good idea," Brandon said, before Alva could speak. "I'll drive you there."

"I'm looking after Miss Roberts." Higgins voice was edged.

But Jake Brandon's eyes drew Alva's glance in their far gray depths. And the uneasiness once more edged through her.

"Thank you," she said to Jake, forgetting that Higgins was waiting for an answer. "That'll give us a chance to talk. Neighbors ought to know each other."

"There's a rent buckboard waiting outside," he told her. "Ready to leave?"

"Ma'am,"—the foreman's words thrust between them—"I'd rather go with you, so I can be sure you're all right."

"I will be." She spoke in her usual, even tones. "You can come to the hotel later, but not until sundown. I want to sleep."

The words were entirely courteous, but they also held a note of accepted authority. She was the boss, issuing orders.

The corners of Brandon's mouth moved and light flickered in his eyes. He took Alva's arm and as they left the waiting room she wondered if she was moving with deliberate slowness in order to prolong the seconds of the nearness, the awareness of his touch. During the first moment of consciousness after her faint, his closeness had given her a feeling of security.

"But that's crazy," she told herself. "I'm probably still weak, and imagining things."

As they emerged from the station, a pony traveling at top speed shot around the corner of the building and slid to a stop.

"Jake!" the girl in the saddle cried. "You're back! Welcome home!"

Her glance brushed fleetingly over Alva and hurried back to Brandon. And, for the first time in her life, Alva knew swift, disturbing envy. The girl was a wheat-colored blonde with a perfect skin, and her hazel eyes were startling against such fairness. She was immaculately smart in whipcord riding pants, polished boots, white silk shirt and emerald neckerchief. Her hair gleamed

and her skin glowed.

By contrast Alva thought she herself must look like a drab in her practical outfit of gray flannel shirt, gray breeches and old boots, all generously covered with dust.

"Hi, Bess!" Brandon greeted. "This is Alva Roberts—maybe you know each other."

The blond girl nodded. "Yes, years ago, in the county grade school," she said unsmilingly.

Alva's eyes widened in surprise and she searched hastily through her memory for a child resembling this lovely blonde.

Bess smiled, thinly. "You wouldn't remember, of course. I'm Bess White. I live on the Crossed Y, near the river branch. The White place."

"Oh—yes." Alva flushed.

The Crossed Y was a small unprosperous ranch which had once lost a war rights suit against the Flying T. A place of sagging outbuildings, and a dilapidated house crowded with unkempt children.

"It's strange we haven't seen each other in so long," Alva said. "But I'm glad we've finally met again."

"No, its not strange." Bess White's voice was colorless. "After we finished the eighth grade you went East to school. Besides, I don't see much of—the Flying T people."

"I'm taking Miss Roberts to the hotel, Bess," Jake Brandon said quickly. "It was good to see you again."

The fair girl's face went still. "But won't we meet later on? You've just come back—and you've been away for ages!"

He grinned up at her. "Not as long as that, but I like the way it sounds. I'll be around town for the rest of the day. We can't miss each other."

The stillness remained on Bess' face as she lifted the reins.

"Adios. Good-by—Alva."

AS BESS rode away, Brandon's glance followed her. When his eyes again met Alva's, they had changed, become guarded.

Jake Brandon helped Alva into the rent buckboard, took a place beside her on the rear seat, and as it rolled away from the station, she felt suddenly, sharply alone. Or as if Bess White were still present!

"Tell me about your ranch," she said.

His gray glance reached for hers and she wondered if he was thinking of the other girl.

"What am I worrying about?" she asked herself, impatiently. "It doesn't matter who he's thinking of! Once I've had a rest this'll seem—funny. I may not even remember him, for I know a lot of men, most of them better looking, but when they go romantic on me, I'm always sorry. Yet here I am, behaving as if this is terribly important!"

"The Boxed O's a small spread," Jake told her. "Only three waddies in my outfit, but I'm beginning to build up the herd and I'll have to expand soon. We drove the beef crop to the pens, so I've been away. I'd just got off the train when I noticed your cattle being loaded, and stopped to have a look. Not many ranchers around here can afford to ship by rail."

Alva straightened and the new, awkward uncertainty left her.

"In the end it's cheaper," she explained briskly. "Because the stock reaches the feeding pens more quickly and without as much loss of weight. That means a shorter time in the pens and more profit on the market."

There was a brief, puzzling flicker of light in his gray eyes.

"Sure," he drawled, "but it also depends on your financing or bank-roll. Not everybody has enough cash to take the long view."

"But—"

"Here's the hotel, ma'am."

He went in with her and waited while she registered.

"You'll be all right now," he said, as a bellboy came to show her upstairs. "*Adios*, ma'am."

"Wait!" The word lifted too sharply. "Won't I—we'll meet again, won't we?"

Was she actually doing this? Insisting upon seeing him? Bess White had made the same demand, but with a difference. Bess had been as feminine and intriguing as a chiffon scarf, whereas she, Alva, was anything but that at the moment! Odd, though, that the blond girl had been so smartly and expensively dressed, considering the probable income of the Crossed Y.

Brandon had turned back and there was the brief, far flicker of light in his eyes.

"I hope so," he said. Then, almost awkwardly, as if he too, were suddenly unsure, he put out his hand. "How about dinner? Or aren't you staying in town overnight?"

The pressure of his fingers was a steady warmth and she forgot Bess White.

"Yes, dinner'll be nice."

Remembering she had intended to leave for the Flying T before dark, she turned away too swiftly and was nervously careful not to glance back as she went upstairs. Her throat was on fire and thin jets of flame were climbing into her cheeks.

This was ridiculous! She was behaving as girls had during her grandmother's youth.

The big room into which the bellboy showed her seemed filled with mirrors, although later she realized that actually it contained only three. And when she dropped into a chair, she faced a shocking reflection. Her dark hair, which usually held blue shadows in its soft waves, was gray with dust. Her face was dirty, her eyes looked strained and her riding clothes might have just emerged from a sandstorm.

"No wonder he was anxious to get away," she thought, and went to ring a bell which, according to the notice above it, would bring the hall maid.

With the maid's help, she shampooed her hair and got into a tin tub filled with hot water so that, wrapped in a sheet-sized bath towel, she was finally able to face the mirrors with more composure.

TALLER than the average girl, Alva's body was fashioned with a nice balance which made her seem almost small. Her hair, once more glisteningly dark, emphasized the blue of her eyes, and her lips were the deep, lush crimson which belongs only with black hair.

"Maybe he won't recognize me when I'm clean," she decided and, turning away from the mirror, got into bed.

She was asleep immediately, and was awakened at dusk by the sound of her name spoken in a voice which touched the words with music. Gathering the sheet hastily around her bare shoulders, she started up in panic. But the room was empty except for herself, and after a moment she grinned.

"I actually thought I'd heard him. That's what is known as a vivid dream."

The grin disappeared abruptly. She had heard *him* saying her name. Had dreamed of Jake Brandon's voice touching it with special meaning.

Getting out of bed she dressed and went to the window which looked out toward the distant Big Horns. As her unseeing glance fixed on the peaks, she told herself:

"I can't pretend. Things like this do happen, after all—and this is it. He's the one—Jake Brandon."

Well, there was a way to manage anything. She had learned that during the three years since her father's death, and knew that the first was to come to a definite decision. If she wanted Brandon, if she really loved him, the problem was simple. Most men found her attractive and it shouldn't be hard to interest him.

Nor need marriage change her life. He had said his Boxed O was a small spread, which meant they could get rid of it and make the Flying T their home.

"Yes, it would be all right," she concluded. "If he's the one, I'll marry him."

CHAPTER II
Anger in His Kiss?

WITH a final glance at her crumpled riding clothes, Alva went downstairs to the lobby and sat in a chair near the staircase. Straight ahead was the hotel entrance and directly across from her, through an arched doorway was the writing room.

A man and girl were in the writing room, sitting close together and talking in low voices. Alva looked away, but the girl's suddenly lifting voice pulled her glance back.

"I don't care what you say!" the girl cried. "The Flying T will grab—as it always has. She's like her father!"

The angry words were choked off, and Alva saw that the girl was Bess White. And the man Jake Brandon. Bess shot up from her chair, then turned and spoke again, in tones which were almost inaudible. But as Jake got to his feet, Bess laughed and swayed toward him, her face lifting.

Brandon bent and kissed her. And thin, hard laughter formed inside of Alva.

This was the man she had decided to marry because "it had to be!"

Jake was grinning as the kiss ended, and he and Bess started out of the writing room. They passed within a few feet of Alva and walked toward the main doors. Alva stared after them.

"They were too interested in each other to see me or anyone else," she thought.

She locked her hands together in her lap and looked down at them. If that was the

situation she was lucky to know it so quickly. Now she could keep the thing which had sprung into life at her first meeting with Jake Brandon from growing. Could push it farther and farther away, until it no longer touched her.

"Miss Roberts!"

She felt her heart jerk and realized Brandon was standing before her, his gray eyes cool, the lines at the sides of his mouth lost in his smile.

"I came down here to wait for you, hoping it'd be cooler," she said.

"I've heard it's almost breezy in the dining room," he told her. "Let's find out."

"Don't tell me that I heard music," she said, as they started for the dining room. "Rawlins is becoming very grand."

"Yeah. Bess says this hotel has dinner music every night, and a dance once a week."

Alva's teeth clicked together behind her lips. She had so quickly forgotten Bess whom she had seen in his arms. She must remember that being with Jake was a casual matter, brought about by her own insistence; by his desire to be courteous.

The waiter settled them at a table well away from the orchestra and placed to catch the breeze from the long windows opening onto an outside gallery.

"It's nice being with you," Brandon said. "The owner of the Flying T always gets the best. I'd have been stuck in a corner."

"I don't believe that. If you've been here before—" But she cut off her words and color stung into her cheeks.

"Yes, I've been here," he said, "but with Bess White and they give her the best, too. Pretty girls like Bess always get special attention."

"She's very lovely," Alva said evenly.

"Almost as lovely as you." The crooked curve of his mouth deepened and he added, "Why look surprised? You know you're prettier than Bess—in a different way. But Bess makes every man feel she needs his protection."

Alva's blue eyes looked directly into his.

"And with me," she said, "they wonder what kind of a deal they can get out of the Flying T."

Light ran along his gray glance. "Guess you've called the turn."

"Thanks." She finished her coffee and put down the cup. "I've a definite feeling, Jake Brandon, that you don't like me. So let's go."

But as they left the table, he drew her arm through his and his grin was a hand closing on her heart.

"How about a walk on the gallery, just to prove we're still friends?" he asked.

The gallery was actually a narrow, roofed porch which encircled the building and just now it was mysterious with a mist of mingled moonlight and darkness.

They walked silently toward the front of the hotel, but there Brandon stopped.

"You're not entirely right," he said abruptly, and his hands, closing on her shoulders, turned her around to face him. "What I didn't explain is that Bess' type is more—appealing at the moment, because a man knows that eventually she can be labeled 'finished business' and he can get on with the job of living."

"The words sound all right but they don't mean anything," Alva said, and she could feel his glance, a line of flame, moving over her face.

"I'm saying that some women are easy to love because a man's instinct tells him it won't be fatal one way or another. But a girl like you is something else. He'll never get you out of his system, even by marrying you."

"Very nice. Just the right way to—soften what you said in the dining room."

"I'm not trying to soften anything. I'm just being honest." His grip on her shoulders had tightened and her flesh under his fingers stirred into fire.

And then she was in his arms, held tightly against him. His lips, claiming hers, brought back the moment of their first meeting, pushed away the thought of Bess and the realization that he cared for her. Flame was in his kiss, blazing against Alva's lips.

But there was also something else. Something like angry denial.

The mist of moonlight and darkness was closing in, holding them together and her lips were answering his. And she knew again that it had to be. That he was the one man, and that nothing could make her put him out of her life.

Not even Bess, for he might have been mistaken in thinking he cared for the other girl. He might have accepted something less than love, because his love belonged to her, Alva. She would be a weakling to give him up without a fight—and she wouldn't! Not until he proved he belonged to Bess White.

He released her, slowly, and they looked

at each other without speaking. Was there actual anger in his eyes? Were his lips which had taken hers so demandingly, twisted into harshness?

"Maybe that'll give you an idea," he said.

"Yes." Her lips were unsteady. "It may even tell me—"

But she stopped, realizing she had almost admitted her own emotion. Had determined to force Bess out of his life so that it could belong to Alva Roberts.

His gray glance thinned, but abruptly he grinned.

"You're a strange girl. You don't seem to know anything of life or men. You act as if you'd never learned to laugh, or flirt."

Shock ran up into her throat and stopped her breath. She had never learned to laugh or flirt. So that's how it was, how he felt. His kiss had been part of a game, perhaps one he frequently played!

Her head lifted, her eyes became mocking.

"Maybe my game is a little smoother than yours," she challenged.

He was still very close, almost touching her, but she would not betray her awareness of him by moving away.

"I should have thought of that," he murmured. "Smoothness usually comes from practice, doesn't it?"

"So I've been told."

He kissed her again but there was no laughter, no flirtatious lightness in the kiss. Instead, his lips forced an answer from hers and she clung to him, yielding to his arms.

"Yes, it has to be," she was thinking. 'Even if he pretends it's a game. Even if it *is* one for him."

But it was she who moved away, drawing back, out of his arms.

"I just remembered," she said, trying to make her breathless words sound casual. "I can't stay in town, after all. My foreman's coming at ten to drive me out to the Flying T. One of the waddies has already taken our horses to the ranch. . . ."

At sunup, Alva awoke with a sense of urgency, a hurried need to remember something, someone. And the memory came at once. Jake Brandon.

She got out of bed swiftly, holding away the thought of him, and after a hurried bath dressed in another of her practical riding costumes. Tying a scarlet neckerchief at the throat of her brown shirt, she went downstairs.

Kate Nesbit, her housekeeper, served breakfast. As they ate, the older woman made notes on supplies and menus.

The day was moving into its customary routine.

But as Alva left the table, Mrs. Nesbit said abruptly:

"Are you worried about anything?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"You seem different."

Warmth beat up into the girl's cheeks. "I don't feel different," she assured.

SUNLIGHT was bright and hard when she stepped from the low porch which ran the entire length of the big, oblong-shaped ranchhouse. Her father had had the house remodeled just before his death, and it was imposing in its simplicity.

Of adobe-covered brick, it had been planned to allow a maximum of light and air while retaining the characteristics of the Wyoming range. Surrounded by a lawn, kept green with water piped down from the hills, it was separated from the working yard which contained bunkhouse, corrals, barns and cookshack.

The foreman came out of his office in the bunkhouse.

"I was just going up to the house," he said, baring his sparse gray hair to the sunlight. "Been wondering how to begin what I have to tell you. You're not going to like it."

She waited, without speaking and he went on:

"After you went to the hotel yesterday, I ran into Dirk Belding. Probably should have told you last night, but it was late and you'd fainted at the loading pens, so I waited."

"Who's Dirk Belding?" she asked.

Higgins' glance shifted. "That land agent who came up here from Denver last year. I thought you'd heard about him. Before anyone knew what was going on, he'd bought up every unclaimed piece of grassland in the county. Some of it was range which should've belonged to different ranches, but didn't legally, because mistakes were made when the spreads were surveyed. Anyhow, he's got it—and all according to law."

"Yes," Alva said. "The bank manager mentioned it weeks ago, and I didn't like the way it sounded. This man Belding doesn't seem too honest."

Higgins shrugged. "Its honest enough—as some business methods go. But it means there's no more open range and the south-

east section of the home spread now belongs to Belding."

"The land near Green Creek branch?" she exclaimed. "Why, that's always belonged to the Flying T!"

"No, ma'am. We thought it did, but he proved to the county land office by maps and surveyors that its beyond the Flying T line, not included in the title record of the land."

"I see. I suppose he wants us to buy it back. Is that it?"

"Not exactly. He intends to sell it to the highest bidder. There are several bidders, he tells me, and one of 'em was trying to close the deal yesterday."

"Who?"

"Jake Brandon of the Boxed O. Seems he's enlarging his outfit. I told Belding I'd take it up with you this morning, but he wouldn't wait. Said Brandon's offer was a good one and he wanted a decision right then, before sundown. Finally I worked out a deal. Maybe I overstepped myself, but it seemed the best thing to do. I took an option in your name."

She turned her head, sharply. "How much did you say I'd pay for the option and how long does it run?"

"A thousand dollars. It has to be taken up in two weeks."

"A thousand dollars!" Her lashes squeezed together until her eyes were thin lines of dark blue. "Does it apply on the purchase price, and what *is* he asking for the section?"

Higgins' usually florid face looked colorless. "The thousand is for the right to buy at the end of two weeks. He hasn't definitely fixed the price. He's going to take written bids and accept the highest offer. The value of the option is that after bids are in you'll have a chance to meet the top price."

She was silent, her eyes as cold as blue tile. Anger was robbing her lips of fullness, but when she spoke, her voice was careful, though Ed Higgins had always been with the Flying T. Or at least, had been top-hand for as long as she could remember.

"You've certainly—surprised me," she said. "And Dad wouldn't have believed this. He always said you were the best rancher in the country."

The foreman's jaw set. "We need that range. Even if it costs a thousand dollars to hold onto it until you can buy it, the Flying T's better off. The grassland'll mean a lot more than a thousand dollars."

Her determined control broke.

"But there's the little matter of how I might feel!" she snapped. "Don't you think I ought to be consulted before you start anything like this? I've never given you such authority, Ed."

"I know, but Belding said he wouldn't wait for any woman to make up her mind. He wanted the decision then."

She flushed. "You were sure I'd back you up? Make good on a deal I knew nothing about."

"Yes, ma'am." He looked at her steadily. "I figured you'd trust my judgment the same as your dad did."

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Alva turned sharply away, but stopped and came back to him.

"Of course I'll go through with it. How does he want the money."

"I told him your check would be mailed today."

"All right. Ask the wrangler to get my pony."

The incident was closed, but Alva was still angry and when her horse was ready she rode swiftly out of the yard. But on the wagon trail she reined in.

"I'd better see Jake Brandon," she thought. "I don't like our being made to bid against each other. And its foolish. The section's always belonged to the Flying T."

Wheeling south, she rode toward Green River Branch and, beyond the forks, passed the Crossed Y, Bess White's home. Automatically she slowed her mount to look at the small spread with its unpainted gate posts sunk in weeds. It was hard to visualize smart, pretty Bess living in such a place.

At the southeast section she left the trail and took to the range. Riding through grazing Flying T cattle, she headed for the Boxed O, a mile east.

The ranch bore the orderly stamp a competent cattleman always gives his land. The gates were neatly lettered, the buildings freshly painted. At one end of the yard was a small log and 'dobe house. At the other, a bunkhouse and barn. There was just one person in sight, a man working in the corral.

CHAPTER III
Unexpected Visitor

ALVA'S pulse lifted and struck against the flesh of her wrists, and at the sound of her pony's hoofs, Jake Brandon turned. He waved and came out to meet her.

"Howdy, ma'am," he greeted.

"Good morning," she said. "I thought we ought to have a talk."

He nodded, his eyes quiet and pleasantly cool.

"Good business men always like direct action. Let's go into the house."

"Good business men!" Last night he had told her his kiss had been only part of the man and woman game. A moment's flirtation and nothing more.

He helped her down, his touch impersonal as if she had never been in his arms or known the demand of his lips, and they walked to the house.

"My shack's just bachelor's quarters, ma'am," he said. "You'll probably think its more of a camp than a house."

But inside, she found complete cleanliness and comfort. There were no curtains, but the window panes were sparklingly clear. The living room held big chairs, tables piled with magazines, and newspapers, book-cases and foot-rests.

"You don't seem to be suffering actual hardship." she murmured.

"Not too much."

He pulled out a chair and when she sat down, he began to roll a smoke.

"There was something you wanted to talk about," he reminded her.

Streaks of color shot across her cheeks and disappeared into the hair above her temples.

"Yes. A lot of things," she said, her voice light.

He met her glance. "But the real reason for your visit is the southeast section."

He was refusing to let the memory of the night before come between them. Was being deliberately remote.

"Yes," she said, matching his tone. "I didn't know that it wasn't part of the Flying T until my foreman told me Belding had bought it, as he's bought a lot of other land in this district. So I—we've taken an option on it."

"Yeah. An option to pay anything Belding asks. It's nice to be rich."

She got out of her chair. "I'm sorry you feel that way. I came here because I wanted to be frank about it. I don't like secret maneuvering or—tricks."

"Sure." He came slowly to his feet and seemed very tall as he looked down at her. "And by explaining I haven't a chance, you may get it cheaper, with no one bidding against you."

Her eyes opened to wideness and the hot color dropped out of her face. His face was closed against her and he was looking at her almost mockingly, while even now she wanted to reach out and touch him, to call back the seconds in his arms. Anger touched her, and leaped into sudden, violent storm.

"What's wrong with that?" she demanded. "You haven't a chance of outbidding me, and you know it."

Points of light showed in his eyes. "You're right, ma'am. But it's too bad you're not more of a woman and less of a business man. You're even pretty when you're mad."

She smiled thinly. "Isn't it? Good afternoon. I'll get my own pony—you needn't come with me."

His hand caught her wrist and he turned her around.

"At least, you can learn what being a woman's like," he said, and pulled her close to him.

As his head bent he paused, and his glance caught hers, held it for a second before he kissed her.

The fury dropped from her, and as her hands closed on his shoulders, tiny pulses beat in the tips of her fingers. Ragged little drums pounded in her wrists and throat. She had to make him understand, now, that she hadn't meant her angry challenge and didn't need to learn about being a woman.

His kiss changed and his lips became thin with the hardness of sudden denial, but she prolonged the kiss, her own lips reckless under his even while she knew he must be aware of her surrender.

But then they were standing apart looking at each other almost like enemies.

"Sorry, ma'am," he said, his tone matter-of-fact. "Your being a pretty girl hasn't anything to do with the southeast section, has it?"

She did not speak, and he moved past her to the door.

"I'll bring your horse," he said.

THE door closed behind him and she sank her teeth into her lower lip to hold back the tears. He didn't want her. He hadn't wanted her even when he kissed her, even when her lips had revealed her love.

Her hands closed and became fists.

"He thinks I'm unfeminine. He called me a 'business man' and maybe I *do* seem too capable. Men understand a girl like Bess—as if it isn't easy to be like her! As if any woman couldn't be soft and—beckoning."

But what if he really cared for the other girl?

Hoofs slapped across the yard and she went out, managing to smile as she said "Thanks."

He gave her a hand into the saddle.

"Come again, ma'am. You're always welcome on the Boxed O. . . ."

Alva and Kate Nesbit, the housekeeper, were having supper when Ed Higgins strode into the dining room.

"There's a man from the sheriff's office down at the bunkhouse," he said. "Young Bill Allen's in jail and Sheriff Lowe wants to know if you'll put up bail."

"Bill Allen?"

"One of our waddies. I hired him about six months ago. This is pay-day and when he went to town he got into a fracas with an hombre from the Boxed O. Both of 'em threw lead, but nobody's hurt. Allen's in jail for disturbing the peace."

Chill threaded along Alva's nerves. "Did it have anything to do with the southeast range?"

"I don't know, but I don't see why there'd be trouble over that. The whole thing's settled. The Flying T'll meet the highest bid and there's no reason for lead throwing. I'd better go to town and get Allen out."

"No." Alva pushed back her chair. "I'm going. Have a pony saddled while I change my clothes."

"This is nothing for you to get mixed up in," the foreman protested.

But Alva was already on her way upstairs.

Fifteen minutes later, she was riding toward Rawlins. The trip seemed longer than usual and even when she had reached the edge of the town she kept her pony at a fast canter. But nearing the busiest corner of the main street, she saw a buckboard flashing out of an intersecting road and wheeled her pony sharply to avoid a collision.

The buckboard raced past at unreduced speed and the street lights played over the driver and the girl at his side. The man was slight and fair, with a thin, shrewd face. The girl was Bess White.

When the buckboard disappeared, Alva rode on to the sheriff's office in front of the county jail. She was thinking that Bess had been looking up at the slight, fair man with unmistakable warmth, with invitation.

Jim Lowe, the sheriff, shot up from his desk when Alva entered.

"Miss Roberts! I didn't expect you. Evening, ma'am."

"One of your deputies told my foreman that a Flying T waddy's been arrested." she said. "I came to arrange bail."

The lawman looked surprised. "Yeah, I sent word out to Higgins—figured you wouldn't want a rider held in jail. But Jake Brandon bailed him out half an hour ago."

"Jake Brandon? You mean he put up bail? I thought Allen had fought one of his men."

"That's right, but still Jake got him out. Peculiar, maybe, but none of my business."

"I see." She turned away, but Lowe's voice stopped her.

"I'd figured on a little talk with Higgins, ma'am. Since you came, I'll have to tell you. There's a lot of gissip going around that the Flying T outfit's had orders to make it hot for the Boxed O—on account of the land both spreads want."

"That's not true!" Alva declared.

"Maybe not, ma'am, but I'm putting on extra deputies. The next hombre who throws lead in this town won't get bail. He'll stay here until he's tried."

Alva's lashes squeezed together and her glance held the sheriff's.

"You heard me say that the Flying T has had no such orders. Any waddy who starts trouble will answer to me for it. But I won't have my men blamed for quarrels they're prodded into. Good night."

She went out before he could reply and, stepping into saddle, started at top speed for the Flying T. When she entered the yard, Higgins was waiting for her.

"All right?" he demanded. "Did you get everything fixed?"

"I—" She started to explain, but changed her mind and dismounted. "I guess its all right," she said. "Good night, Ed."

"Where's Allen?" he asked.

SHE pretended not to hear and went on across the yard. The house looked

serene in the moonlight and instead of entering the main hall, she turned down the porch to the long glass doors which served as living room windows. As she stepped through them, Jake Brandon got out of a chair.

"Good evening. I've been waiting for you."

"The sheriff said you put up bail for one of my waddies."

"Yeah."

The word was a low drawl, and his gray glance was light as silver. Metallic with anger! She went, her steps slow, to a chair.

"It seems strange," she said, choosing her words carefully. "Higgins told me Allen was arrested because of a fight with one of your men. Then why should you put up bail for him?"

"Let's sit down," he said. "This can be talked over between two sensible business men. We'll keep the practical angle in mind. You always do, don't you?"

She met the thin gaze. "No, not always." She spoke the words clearly and for a second, her blue eyes were pleading.

"Then I'm mistaken," he said. "Still, maybe we can get the story of Allen's arrest straightened out. Of course business men don't always settle their differences. Sometimes they just make their position clear."

She realized that her hair was wind-blown, her clothes rumpled, and that once more he was seeing her as disheveled and charmless.

"I'm waiting," she said. Her words were crisp but her pulses were hammers flailing at her wrists.

"That piece of grassland isn't worth a range war," he said. "But when I talked to Allen he felt he was expected to throw lead at anyone from the Boxed O."

"Why? What made him believe that?"

"He was hazy about it, but had an idea I'm trying to grab Flying T range. That's why I put up bail. He just wanted to be loyal to his boss. And killings are bad business, ma'am. So are fights between ranches. Expensive, too."

Alva's eyes strained against his and once more anger was touching her. And immediately it blazed into fierce, surging fury. He couldn't believe she was encouraging her outfit to start a range war! As if the Flying T would use guns to settle *any* issue! Yet, he was saying those things, telling her what she knew only too well!

She caught back the sweep of anger, told herself not to speak the furious words pressing against her lips.

"I agree with you," she said, and formed the words precisely. "It's very bad business, and the Flying T has never been accused of bad management."

The edged taunt could not be mistaken and she felt almost primitive satisfaction when a dark flush spread along his jaws.

"You're right, as usual," he said. "Goodnight, ma'am."

"I'll talk to Allen in the morning," Alva said, ignoring the fact that Jake was starting out of the room. "Maybe that'll clear things up."

He halted, turned back slowly and his smile was hard. "You won't have a chance to talk to him. He's not with your outfit any more. I hired him tonight and he's already on his way to my spread. He didn't have to return here to collect his wages, because this was pay-day."

"*You* hired him?"

"Yeah," Jake drawled. "I'm expanding—building up my herds—so I need more men."

"But why should he want to work for you?" Alva demanded. "The Flying T pays the highest salaries in the whole district."

"It did," Jake told her. "But this time I outbid you. I can play your game—for a little while."

"That's crazy. You can't outbid the Flying T!"

"I can try," he said, his words cutting through hers. "Goodnight, ma'am."

Again he started away, only to return to her.

"I forgot something—this seems to be a habit now."

And without taking her into his arms, he bent his head and kissed her. It was a swift, light kiss with nothing more than challenge behind it.

CHAPTER IV
"It's All Over"

BY EIGHT o'clock the next morning Alva was at her desk in the office which had once belonged to her father, when Kate Nesbit came to the door.

"Bess White of the Crossed Y is here," Mrs. Nesbit said, her voice flat.

Alva started up, and then sat down again. Bess. Her hands fumbled at a drawer and when it opened she took out a mirror. She looked quite capable, as usual. Hair neatly smooth, clothes practical and unattractive.

She dropped the mirror back into the drawer and, leaving the office, crossed the hall to the living room.

Bess was waiting near the glass doors which formed the front wall, and Alva knew a second's sharp envy. The blond girl's clothing could not have been bought in Rawlins. Her tailored riding breeches were dark blue, her silk shirt a lighter tone of the same color and her neckerchief an even paler shade, all of which stressed the fairness of her lovely face. She was wearing boots of Spanish leather, and carrying a midnight blue Stetson.

"This is pretty early," she said at once, "but I couldn't wait to get it over. I haven't slept all night."

"Sit down, won't you?" asked Alva. "Would you like some breakfast?"

"No. I couldn't eat. Will you"—her hazel eyes fixed on Alva's—"try to understand what I'm going to say? Maybe I shouldn't have come here like this. Certainly I never thought I'd have to ask you for anything."

"If I can give you what you want, then its already yours."

Bess shook her head and dropped into a chair. "I wish it were that easy. I came about Jake Brandon, and the southeast section you both want."

"Oh. He told you."

"No. I heard it from someone—I've forgotten just who. But everyone on this range knows what's happening. And Jake's determined to have the land. When he found out Belding had given you an option he got reckless, crazy."

Alva did not speak, and the hazel glance swept sharply over her face.

"He persuaded the Diamond K and Circle C to go into partnership with him—he calls it a 'syndicate'—and the plan is for the three spreads to have joint use of the section. But the Diamond K and the Circle C are small outfits, too. They—he's had to borrow money. Jake is mortgaging his stock and everything he owns."

"Why?" asked Alva.

"To outbid you, of course! They'll make an offer you'll consider it foolish to meet. Jake"—she smiled apologetically, but with possessive tenderness—"says you're too good a business woman to pay ten times what the land's worth, that you'll let it go and find other range."

So he had talked to Bess. Had even discussed her, Alva, with the other girl.

"I'm not sure about that," Alva said. "The southeast section's necessary to the Flying T. Still, you came here thinking I could help you. What do you want me to do?"

Bess leaned forward in sudden, tense appeal.

"Don't let him have it! If he gets it by mortgaging his stock and isn't lucky, he'll lose everything. His ideas of enlarging his spread are wrong, anyhow. Things like that have to be done gradually. And if you just won't be outbid, he can't throw the Boxed O away on such a crazy gamble."

Alva wanted to close her eyes and shut out the sight of the other girl. She wanted, fiercely, to stop remembering Jake's arms and lips.

"It means a great deal to you, doesn't it?" she murmured.

"Yes," Bess said. "A girl doesn't fight to save a man from himself otherwise, does she?"

"Not usually."

"Then you'll see that he doesn't get the section?"

"I—"

But as Alva met Bess' eyes, her words stopped. For the smallest part of a second hard bits of light had glinted against the soft hazel.

"I don't know what to say, right now," Alva said then. "I'd like to think it over for a while."

Bess' lips drooped. "Well—thanks, anyhow."

"I'll let you know tomorrow," promised Alva.

She went to the door and watched the blond girl ride out of the yard.

"She's so feminine," she thought again. "So obviously feminine, and everything about her stresses it. Maybe Jake Brandon can't help loving her. If I'd been more like Bess when I first met Jake, if I'd been wearing the right clothes, it might have been different."

SHE broke off, her eyes fixing into an unseeing stare. And then she whirled for the stairs. Maybe Jake wasn't yet actually in love with Bess, even though the girl had come here to help him, and in that case, there was

still a chance. Alva Roberts had a right to fight for him.

Taking the stairs at a run, she crossed her bedroom to the big, well-fitted closet which was filled with lovely clothes. Exquisite dresses, shoes and hats, which were shipped regularly from New York. Only her riding costumes had been kept drably "suitable" to the job of running a ranch.

Pulling out half a dozen dresses, she spread them on the bed, placed sheer underwear and gossamer stockings beside them. And after that she went to work.

It was noon when she got into the buckboard waiting before the door. The whole morning had gone into the business of dressing, but she had achieved her objective. A dressmaker suit of dusty rose defined her firmly straight body and small waist. Her hat was also of dusty rose in a wide, pliant straw which made a perfect background for her skin and eyes. Her hair, curling away from her cheeks, was night mist rolled into neatness at the nape of her neck. Black gloves, slippers, and bag lent exactly the right accent.

Belding's office was on the second floor of the bank building and, leaving the buckboard near the hitch-rack, she went up the stairs, telling herself that the meeting with the land operator would be a bet. An answer to her attractiveness which would help her to make Jake Brandon realize her femininity.

On the second floor, she saw the name "Dirk Belding" in huge letters and, as she turned toward it, the door opened. Bess White came out and behind Bess was a Flying T waddy named "Red" Taylor.

Bess stopped sharply, and her hazel eyes were startled. She spoke so quickly that her lips had no shape.

"Alva! You're here, too! When I saw you I didn't expect to go to town. I—" Her words trailed off in confusion.

"I thought I'd better have a talk with Mr. Belding," Alva explained, and let her glance rest on Red Taylor.

He flushed, and jerked off his hat.

"Afternoon ma'am," he muttered.

"Of course," Bess said. "Well, of course. See you later."

She hurried for the stairs and Taylor followed swiftly, as if anxious to escape.

Alva pushed open the door they had just closed and entered a big, bare-looking office. At a desk near the windows was the fair, shrewd-looking man she had seen with Bess White the night before. He got up, his smile so wide as to seem intense.

"Can I help you, Miss—" His teeth were unusually fine and the smile showed all of them.

"Are you Mr. Belding?" Alva asked.

"Yes." His eyes took on the intensity of his mouth, and signaled admiration.

"I'm Alva Roberts." She took the seat he placed beside the chair, and her smile was uncertain, her blue glance hopeful. "I came about the rangeland. That section—you know? Its always been part of the Flying T, or so we thought. But now my foreman tells me it belongs to you."

Surprise glinted briefly in his eyes and she wondered if he ever stopped smiling, or if it were a form of nervous affliction.

But he leaned toward her and beamed even more determinedly.

"Your foreman took an option in your name," he said. "I got your check this morning."

She nodded as if relieved that he understood.

"He told me to send it right away. I depend on him so much. I don't know what I'd have done without him since Dad died—" She let her voice trail off into wistfulness, then went on: "I came to ask if we couldn't just settle things without so much trouble. If other people also want to buy the land, it's liable to—well, I don't want my neighbors to think I'm selfish. Couldn't I just pay you whatever you want for the section right now?"

Her own smile was almost shy, as she waited. It even faded under his unwavering white-toothed grin. And his eyes told her she was lovely, the kind of girl men wanted to do things for.

He edged his chair closer to hers. "There's nothing for you to worry about, Miss Roberts. Forget the whole thing until its time to take up the option. After everyone's made their bid you can meet the highest, and the land is your's."

"Then I can't just pay whatever you want right now?"

The admiration in his eyes brightened as he shook his head.

"Sorry," he said with another smile, "it can't be done that way."

ALVA felt silent laughter roll up in her. He was fervently acknowledging feminine beauty and appeal, but was making it

clear such things had nothing to do with business or profit!

"But the Boxed O can't afford to pay what I will," she said guilelessly.

"I'm not sure. Brandon was here an hour or two ago and he's ready to go pretty high."

Alva accepted defeat then, and left, smiling her thanks for Belding's farewell compliments. If Jake had been here an hour before, he might still be in town, and if they were to meet he would see her as she was now—as she could always be for him.

She walked slowly up the main street and at the end of the business section, crossed to the opposite sidewalk for the return trip. And, glancing through the uncurtained windows of the town's one restaurant, she saw him sitting at a table.

Automatically, without willing it, she turned into the café. Bright patches of color burned against her cheek-bones and as a waitress led her toward a table, Brandon glanced up.

"Miss Roberts," he said, pushing back his chair. But he was cool. "How about sitting with me? I've just ordered."

"Thank you." Her eyes were deep and her mouth soft as she looked up at him.

As soon as the waitress had taken her order and left, he asked:

"How'd you get along with Belding?"

Her lips broke apart and the patches of color in her cheeks spread out over her face. But before she could speak, he added:

"That's about the only reason you'd be in town again today."

She fixed her glance on the table. There was no difference in his voice, no change in his eyes as he looked at her. Couldn't he see she was no longer the "business woman" but a decorative girl?

"I was hoping to get the thing settled right away," she said, "so we could stop being—competitors." She saw the lines cut into the flesh between his brows and added, hastily: "There's no reason for us to fight each other. I'd like to be friends—real neighbors."

"Meaning," he said, "that you don't like opposition. Because I hired Allen away from the Flying T, you're even more determined to keep the southeast section. But I'm afraid you've got a fight on your hands. A couple of other ranchers are coming in with me, and we'll make it bad business."

The warmth in her cheeks disappeared and her lips drooped. He was talking exactly as if she were a tired, disheveled girl in unattractive riding clothes. And he was unconscious of any difference in her appearance or manner.

Her slim shoulders sagged and a new, heavy stillness gathered inside of her. It was no good. Apparently Bess had blinded him to every other woman in the world.

"Why not be honest?" she asked herself. "The truth probably is that he loves Bess. Maybe he loves her so much no one else means anything."

She lifted her chin and smiled. "You sound as if you hate me," she said.

His gaze remained level and quiet. "I wouldn't say that. Maybe I just understand you."

"I don't believe I'll wait for lunch, after all. *Adios.*"

Without hearing his reply, she went out and walked back to the buckboard. It was over, and she could go on with her job of running the Flying T. That is, as soon as she stopped feeling empty inside.

Alva flicked the whip above the horse's back and the buckboard picked up speed. A breeze touched her face and she pulled off the big, dusty-rose hat and dropped it onto the seat. The Green River Branch and the forks were just ahead. She turned the horse onto the road-trail leading west and then jerked at the reins, pulling to a stop.

That had sounded like a gun! And it had come from the east!

The hoarse, metallic bark came again and chill flickered along Alva's nerves. She backed the buckboard, wheeled swiftly and cracked the whip, sending the horse racing across the main road, toward the southeast section. As she passed the Crossed Y she did not even glance toward the gates, and as her swaying vehicle neared the section, she used the whip again.

There was a blurred scene at first. Cattle milling nervously. But then she saw a riderless pony and a man kneeling beside a still figure whose arms were stretched out against the earth.

SENDING the buckboard off the trail, onto the range, Alva drove it through the scattering cattle, not even aware of its dangerous swaying. The kneeling man looked up, stared, and got to his feet. She wrapped the reins around the whipstock and jumped to the ground, forgetting her high-heeled slippers as she tried to run.

"What is it? What's happened?"

The man was a Flying T rider named Hank Murphy, and he stared at her oddly.

"You can see for yourself, ma'am. That's one of Brandon's waddies. He's been shot here on our range—or what we call our range."

His tone was harsh and the chill deepened around Alva's nerves, making her feel lifeless.

"Is he dead?" she asked.

"Not yet. But he's in bad shape."

"Who shot him?"

"One of—your men saw him riding down trail and sent a bullet over his head. He turned back to find out what it was about and he had a hand on his gun. But he didn't get a chance to draw. Red shot first."

"Red?"

"Yeah. Red Taylor. Higgins sent me over here, and Taylor showed up just a few minutes ago."

"Where is he now?"

The waddy's eyes narrowed. "Where would you expect? Naturally he left—went away quick."

Alva caught back her own, swift words. Even Murphy, one of her own outfit, seemed to believe she was behind the outbreak of violence! And Red Taylor, who had shot the Boxed O rider, had been in Dirk Belding's office with Bess White!

"Put that man into the buckboard and take him to the Boxed O," Alva ordered. "Stay there with him. I'll go to town and send out a doctor."

"But—"

"Get busy," she snapped. "I'll use your pony. Can you handle the man alone?"

"Yeah, sure, but—"

She stepped to his waiting horse, pulled up her skirt and swung into saddle.

When she entered the Flying T yard, Higgins stared, and then began to run.

"What happened?" he called. "You left here in a buckboard!"

"Bring me a fresh pony," she said, cutting through his words.

CHAPTER V
Face to Face

IN THE house, Alva ran up the stairs, and before long, dressed in riding clothes, hurried out again. Higgins was waiting with the pony.

"No matter what happens," Alva said, "there's to be no more gunplay—not even if the Boxed O outfit comes here looking for trouble."

"What are you going to do?" her foreman asked.

"Several things. And that reminds me. Give me your gun."

The foreman's glance met hers and he lifted his Colt from its holster. She pushed it through her belt and as soon as she reached the wagon trail, sent her horse into a long, mile-eating gait for Rawlins.

The animal was blown when she pulled in before Dr. Horton's house and, after being assured that he would leave for the Boxed O at once, she walked along the main street to the bank building. She went upstairs lightly and swiftly now, her whole body tense.

She knocked on Belding's door and opened it before he could finish saying, "Come in."

His eyes swelled against their heavy lids and he shot to his feet.

"Miss Roberts!"

"Yes." She walked to his desk, stood across from it, looking at him. "I'm glad I found you in. I'm looking for Red Taylor, one of my riders. Maybe you know where he is?"

"How would I know?" asked Belding.

Her glance remained fixed on his bulging eyes.

"Perhaps he told you, when he was here today," she said. "He was leaving just as I came in. Bess White was with him."

"Oh? Well, that might be. Lots of people are in and out of here. Seems there was a young fellow with Bess, but I don't remember his name."

"Perhaps this will help you to remember. Red Taylor just shot a Boxed O waddy."

Belding was silent, but his strange smile was still on his lips, more hideous than a grimace.

"I'm beginning to believe," Alva went on, speaking slowly, "that Red Taylor had orders from you to start trouble with Jake Brandon's men. Maybe Bill Allen had, too. It would be worth money to you to have a range war, or at least have a serious fight start. That would let you run the price of the southeast section up to many times what it's worth—because neither side would let themselves be outbid."

He sat down and looked at her with vast amusement.

"You have a vivid imagination," he told her. "But even if this wasn't just something you dreamed up and you'd hit on the truth, what could you do about it?"

Her breath slowed and caught. And she realized exactly what Belding was—a dishonest, cunning trickster who could become overbearing when he felt such arrogance to be safe.

"You can't convict a man on feminine intuition or guesswork," he added. "You haven't a single witness to back up such a wild story, so we'll just forget all about it. When your option runs out I'll sell to the highest bidder."

"Don't be so sure. Eventually, either Red Taylor or Bill Allen will talk—especially if it's made worthwhile."

Belding laughed. "You can try, but who'll take your word or theirs? It'll look as if you paid them so you could outsmart me and get the land for almost nothing by accusing me."

Alva's lips parted, but she held back the swift, angry words and turned away. She walked steadily through the door and closed it behind her.

But then she halted, and her shoulders drooped in defeat. Coming here had been a mistake, and by telling Belding that she suspected him she had made it possible for him to cover up. He would probably make sure, now, that she had no chance of finding Red Taylor.

Someone was coming up the stairs. Walking swiftly. She left the office door and came face to face with Jake Brandon. His glance, the thin gray of a knife blade, ran over her, but the straight lines of his mouth relaxed in surprise.

"Alva! What are you doing here?"

She moved her shoulders impatiently. "Nothing, I guess. I had an idea, but it wasn't so good, after all."

Her words trailed off as she saw the man who had followed Jake up the stairs and now stood uncertainly behind him.

"Bill Allen!"

The waddy jerked off his hat and his glance uneasily shifted away from her.

"Afternoon, ma'am."

"Have you seen Red Taylor?" she demanded. "He shot one of the Boxed O outfit a little while ago."

BRANDON'S hand touched her shoulder, closed on it and turned her around to face him.

"Did he kill him? Who was the waddy?"

"No, he's not dead," she explained quickly, telling herself that his touch meant nothing now, that her pulses were not stirring in answer.

"So, you figured Belding might know something about Red Taylor," Jake murmured, when she finished. "We're just going in to see Belding. You'd better come with us."

His hand slid down to hers and he led her back to the door. Pushing it open, he strode in ahead of her. She saw Belding on his feet, his eyes darting from Brandon to Bill Allen.

"Howdy," Brandon drawled. "Seemed like it was time to pay you another call, Belding. I got to talking to Allen, here, and he told me quite a story. Seems he ran into you in the bar where he was celebrating pay-day and you gave him a hundred dollars to start a row with one of my boys who was doing some drinking at the same time."

Belding's slight body snapped erect. "That's a lie!"

"Cut it," the young waddy said. "I wouldn't have taken your money except that I was half-drunk and didn't know what I was doing. That's why I took a job with the Boxed O, too. I was ashamed, after I sobered up, to go back to the Flying T and it wasn't hard figuring out what your game was."

"I still say it's a lie!" The land operator spoke swiftly, and one hand dropped below the top of the resk, into an open drawer.

It came up holding a revolver, and Jake Brandon's Colt barked. Belding's gun clattered to the floor and he clutched at his bleeding wrist with his left hand.

"Now sit down," Jake said, moving the Colt meaningly. "After I write out all the facts and you sign it—your left hand'll do for that—I'm going to find Taylor and settle with him, too."

Alva, watching the land agent sink obediently into his chair, drew a long, careful breath. The messy business of the southeast section was settled now. At least, the Flying T could no longer be suspected of killing to protect a small piece of range. And she no longer cared what happened to the grassland. She wanted only to stop seeing the cunning-faced Belding, the young puncher he had bribed, and Jake Brandon. Espe-

cially Jake Brandon.

She opened the door quietly, started to speak, but changed her mind and stepped out into the hall. She ran down the stairs and, as she neared the bottom, thought she heard Jake calling her name. But she did not pause or glance back. . . .

Alva let her pony set his own pace back to the Flying T, and she made herself think of anything and everything except Jake Brandon. That was done, and in time maybe the feeling of emptiness would disappear.

But at the forks above the Green River Branch, she pulled in, glanced up the eastern trail, and then wheeled her pony. Perhaps it would be fairer to find out the whole truth about Red Taylor's association with Belding. And Bess White could give it to her.

Alva rode into the Crossed Y yard, to the sun-blistered, uncared-for house and knocked at the door. When it opened, Bess stared out at her, then stepped to the porch, closing the door behind her.

"We can talk better outside," she said hurriedly. "It's so crowded in the house."

Alva nodded and let Bess lead the way into the yard. But as they reached her pony, Alva turned abruptly.

"I left Bill Allen, who used to work for me, in Belding's office," she said. "Belding paid Allen to start trouble with the Boxed O. He also hired Red Taylor to shoot one of Jake Brandon's outfit."

Bess went still and her eyes stared blankly.

"Who told you that?" she demanded.

"Now I understand why you came to see me." Alva ignored her question. "You weren't trying to protect Jake or to save his ranch. You wanted to be sure I—or one of us—would pay anything Belding might ask."

"All right." Bess' hazel eyes were glinting, and there was no softness about the blond girl now. "What're you going to do? I haven't been guilty of anything the least bit *illegal*. Dirk was careful about that, because he doesn't want me in trouble. But if I could fool you and Jake Brandon, why there's no law against it."

ALVA drew a breath which felt sharp against her lips.

"Then your pretense of caring for Jake was just part of the scheme—an act?"

"You didn't really think I was interested in him?" Bess laughed. "What's he got to offer except a dinky little ranch? I'm getting out of this prairie as soon as Dirk Belding's set to leave—and I don't care what anyone thinks of that, either."

"I saw you kissing Jake the other night, in the writing room of the hotel," Alva said.

Bess' eyes lost their narrowness and widened into disbelief.

"Are you trying to be funny? What if I did kiss him? He's attractive. But I'd hate to be in love with every man I've kissed."

Alva went to her pony and stepped up into saddle.

"I wish you happiness," she said. "It's my guess you'll need more than good wishes."

But on the way back to the Flying T, the sense of emptiness and loss grew. Jake Brandon hadn't wanted her, Alva. He was in love with Bess who, knowing that, had used it to help Belding. It was easy now to understand how Bess had acquired her lovely clothes. Easy to understand all about her.

But love was not logical or controlled by reason. It was hunger and need and—despair.

At the forks, Alva swung north and heard a long-drawn call roll up the trail. Reining in her pony, she saw a horseman traveling toward her at top speed. Jake Brandon!

"Why didn't you wait?" he demanded, as he pulled in. "I couldn't leave just then, had to turn Belding over to the sheriff."

"Where is he now?" asked Alva.

"In jail, and he'll stay there until we know about the man Red Taylor shot. If he dies, Belding'll be tried for murder."

She nodded gravely. "He should be. I intended to send you word that I'm having the Flying T stock driven off the southeast range in the morning. It's yours. I wouldn't have it now." She smiled stiffly, and lifted the reins.

But he leaned out of the saddle and caught her arm.

"Hold on. What's this about giving up the section? That doesn't sound like a good business man."

"Maybe not, but it's like a woman. Now—"

"Now," he murmured, and put his free arm around her. Lifting her from the saddle and holding her close to him, he said, low: "there was another little matter I wanted to talk over. Any chance for an hombre who hasn't got anything except a one-man spread? Maybe I ought to say I love you."

Her head jerked up so that she could see his face.

"Love me? Why, you don't even see me! When I went to town this morning I was dressed the way men like. I'd spent hours

making myself pretty and feminine, but it didn't make any difference. You acted just the same!"

He frowned. "This morning? You were as beautiful as ever, but what do you mean?"

"But you didn't even notice I was wearing a rose-colored suit and hat!" she cut in, almost savagely.

His frown deepened. "Oh, sure. I did see something different about the hat. But it didn't change you—because you were still the only girl I've ever wanted."

She tried to laugh, but the sound would not come from her throat.

"You've forgotten Bess White and a few of the things you said to me," she said huskily. "Especially about my trying to make you give up that section. And don't look like that! I saw you kiss Bess the other night."

He grinned. "Yeah. She reminded me we'd known each other for a long time, said we might not meet again because she was leaving the range soon. So I kissed her, but even then I was wishing it was you. Honey, I didn't mean anything I said about the grassland. It was just—well, I hated the idea that I had so little to offer you except my love. I didn't seriously think you were trying to start a range war. I began to suspect Belding of crooked business when young Allen had a fight with one of my men. That's why I bailed him out—wanted to make him friendly enough to talk to me."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she whispered.

His head bent even lower and his breath was against her cheek.

"We've talked enough," he said, and took her lips.

Next Issue's Featured Novelets

JACKIE OF THE OPEN RANGE
By STEPHEN PAYNE

THE MONTANA KNIGHT
By SHIRLEY MANNERS

COURAGEOUS GAL
By THELMA KNOLES

Something in his tone recalled the thrill of that stolen kiss

Warrior Draw

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Eileen Donnegan's love for that handsome sheepman could spell only desperate trouble—for as a cowgirl she had to hate him!

A FEELING that she was shipwrecked gripped Eileen Donnegan as the smoke-dust in the wake of the departing Circle D truck faded out in the clear mountain air. As she strained her eyes for a last look, hot sunshine snared itself in her bright hair, touching it with red, and sprinkling tiny freckles across her fine, straight nose.

"What a goose I am to stand here," she exclaimed, putting her hand to her unshaded face. "When, goodness knows, I can burn in five minutes. Here, Rip!" she called to a beautiful collie who was challenging a squirrel in a big pine. "You may not know it but there's work to do around this new domain of ours."

Waving a contemptuous tail at the chatter-

ing squirrel, Rip stuck a cold nose against the girl's slim brown hand, and they ran gaily to a small cabin, whose new, rough pine walls were bright against a background of blue spruce. Inside the little house, the dimness was so depressing that Eileen decided to put in the windows and get rid of the heavy building paper which darkened the gaping frames.

Having gathered together the tools she needed, she pulled an ancient sombrero over her wavy hair. This, added to her checkered blue-and-white work shirt, faded blue jeans, and scuffed, low-heeled work shoes, made her look like a real ranchman.

For a moment her thoughtful gaze traveled across noisy, splashing Warrior Creek to the country on the other side of the Valley. This land her father was trying to buy and add to the half which he had already acquired.

Cattlemen in the ranching country below the uplands of the Warrior Mountains had become alarmed by rumors that sheepmen, attracted by rich pasture land, were trying to get a foothold here. In an effort to block this menace, Dennis Donnegan had bought for Eileen a relinquishment on a homestead comprising half of Warrior Draw.

Eileen could best be spared from the busy Circle D outfit to finish proving up on the claim. The records of the land across the creek had proved to be badly mixed. After getting Eileen partially settled, Dennis Donnegan had hurried away to do whatever he could in straightening out the puzzle.

Eileen had studied the verdant land across the creek. There had been no noise then except humming of bees, droning of flies and the saucy chatter of chipmunks and squirrels. Blending with the undertones of the rushing stream it made a tuneful symphony. Except for flashing bird bodies and scurrying little woodland creatures nothing had then been stirring, but now—!

Eileen's golden lashed eyes opened very wide; astonishment made an "Oh!" of her curved red lips. For beneath the trees a quarter of a mile away, there were hundreds of grayish-white animals which could be nothing else than sheep! Daddy was too late after all. Someone had beaten him to possession of the rest of Warrior Draw, and had brought hated woollies to mock the Donnegans.

EILEEN turned her back on the hateful sight and picked up one of the window sashes leaning against the wall. At this instant, Rip bounded past her and stopped on the river's rocky bank, barking a lusty challenge.

"Hush, Rip!" commanded Eileen, sadly. "There's nothing we can do about that—outrage. But let's not give them the satisfaction of noticing the blats." When Rip however disregarded her order, she added, "Daddy will be so mad. And he'll have a right to be."

Adding noise of plane and hammer to Rip's explosions, Eileen had the first window almost fitted into the frame when she heard a voice behind her.

"Hi there, young fellow! I came over to say 'hello' to my neighbors. Perhaps, you and your hound can watch my sheep for me sometimes."

Eileen almost wrecked the window as she spun around on the heels of her dusty, flat-heeled shoes, and met the friendly regard of a long-legged, muscular young man. The stranger, discovering his mistake in a glance, let a cheerful grin slowly crinkle the corners of his dancing blue eyes.

"Gosh, ma'am, excuse me! In levis and work shirt, with your head covered by that hat, I took you for a boy. On second thought, though, I'm glad you ain't. It'll make running sheep a pleasure when there's someone like you close by to brighten life."

Eileen measured him with hostile orbs. At the same time a curious little thrill pricked her nerves at the open admiration she read on his blond, irregular features so near her own stormy face. He was a hated sheepman, a menace to Circle D and the entire cattle world she knew.

Yet she unconsciously compared him with cattleman Roy Pollock, whose long time persistent courtship had become quite boring to her. He too looked at her with open admiration, but never yet had his glances brought a thrill to warm her cool indifference.

But Roy was a cowman, and that was important. She remembered this with a little shock of astonishment that this handsome sheepman could have made her forget it.

"This side of Warrior Creek is cattle country. Sheep and sheepmen aren't welcome here," she said curtly.

"That so?" returned the man. The grin vanished and a tight little muscle stood out white along the line of his jaw.

"A sheepman's a sort of devil, I s'pose?"

His teeth gleamed white with his returning grin. "It ain't as if I'm running my flock where there's already cows, and I can say that I'm as honest as any cattleman, Miss—?"

Eileen ignored the questioning inflection.

"My name's Bill Peterson, which makes me 'Pete' to my friends." He added easily, "And I hope we will be friends."

What nerve the fellow had, telling her he was as honest as a cattleman! Eileen's temper boiled, and her voice was like the crackling of leaves crisped by autumn's frost.

"There has never been friendship between cattlemen and sheepmen, so I have none to offer you."

"In other words, 'Get over where you belong and stay there'?" he said coolly. Under the casual words Eileen discerned faintly mocking amusement.

"If I stay on my side of the creek, you can't do less than stay on yours," explained Eileen, her hostility lessened.

After all, she wasn't responsible for the appearance of this good-looking young man, and it was rather cheering to know a strong arm was near by if there was need of one. Not that she'd ever avail herself of it. Oh, no! And she wasn't striking up a friendship with him, either.

"Well," said Pete, a wicked gleam in his eye, "just to make sure I don't forget you—or you me—!"

Catching her to him, he tipped up her bewitching face, and before she could even gasp, his lips met hers, warmly and passionately.

"Please excuse me for this," he breathed, releasing her after a long minute, "but I can't say I'm sorry. You're the loveliest girl I've ever seen!"

While she stood there, a tangle of emotions holding her speechless, the man turned and without a backward glance, nonchalantly vaulted the rushing stream, and walked rapidly up the hill.

"Well, I never!" said Eileen, catching her full lower lip between her sharp white teeth. "He has more nerve than even a sheepman should have! Yet somehow, I have a feeling that it would please him if I told him off for this. I'll have to think of some other way to bring him down."

MORE upset than she liked by this encounter, in which she had not come out victorious, Eileen made all kinds of mistakes with her work. Pounding her thumb, scratching her arms on the splintery pine walls, she was finally balked by a refractory window which wouldn't go in place. Her irritation focused on the intruder with the sheep. Too nervous to listen any longer to the constant blatting which she could not shut out of her ears, she called Rip and walked over the hills beyond her cabin.

When she returned toward dusk, she went into her cabin without glancing across the creek. She fixed supper for herself, fed Rip, who was ravenous, and went to bed. Drugged by the cool mountain air and the music of Warrior Creek, she fell into dreamless sleep.

Eight hours later, Rip's cold nose against her hand awakened her, and she tumbled out of bed, dismayed to discover she had slept so long. Dressing swiftly, she ran to the creek for water, and almost fell in when she saw on the other side of the draw, where yesterday there had been only grass and rocks and trees, a new tent-house, complete with stove pipe and doorstep.

A cheerful whistling added itself to Nature's morning orchestra, and Pete walked around the corner of the new house.

"'Morning, neighbor!" he called above the stream's chatter. "Swell day, ain't it? You feel lonesome last night? If I'm to keep on being honest, I must admit I did, busy as I was."

Eileen swung the water pail carelessly, scattering rainbow drops.

"My name is Eileen Donnegan," she said. It wouldn't hurt if he knew her name. "Neighbor" was a very indefinite title. "Goodness! What a lot of work you have done on your sheep range!"

"I worked most of the night, thanks to a generous moon," he explained. "Got an old corral up at the edge of the timber to hold my flock nights. Did you ever get things from mail order houses? It's almost too good to believe, what one can get. Even nail holes are drilled, and diagrams show just how to put things together.

"First time I ever fooled with this sort of stuff, but I haven't time now to put up a better shack. Not bad, is it?" nodding toward the tent house.

Piqued because Pete so completely ignored yesterday's disconcerting episode, though she should have been grateful because he did, Eileen stooped to fill her pail. A second later Pete was beside her.

"Let me do that. It's a big pail. Then what say to your coming over and having break-

fast with me, and take a look at my layout?" he asked. His strong teeth glistened in the morning sunlight.

Angrier than ever because she felt she couldn't give in, and she'd like to, Eileen answered him shortly.

"I couldn't get across the creek without getting wet, or riding one of my ponies and that's too much bother."

"Now that's really too bad," said Pete apparently serious, although Eileen thought she detected a tinge of mockery in the words. "Let me show you how easy it would be!"

He put down the pail, and turned to her with a purposefulness which sent her heart into a series of jumps and starts that drained all the soft rose stain from the oval of her face.

"Oh, no! I'll come some other time. I slept so late I must get to work at once." She put out her hand, defensively.

Pete's blue eyes rested on her with searching intensity, and color again flooded Eileen's face. It seemed he must be reading her heart and learning that the thought of being in his arms again, had made her afraid of her own feelings.

"Thank you for filling my pail," she hurried on. "You really shouldn't bother with me."

"I wouldn't if I didn't like it," was the answer. "Like it better than—than anything else I could do."

While she fitted the rest of the sashes, and washed all the windows until they sparkled, Eileen was acutely conscious of Bill Peterson. Surreptitious glances showed her how carefully he herded the band of sheep. On the open upland she noticed also that some of them were Merinos, and therefore especially valuable.

Unlike an ordinary sheep herder, however, Pete didn't loaf in idleness while they grazed, but skillfully cut and trimmed a dozen or so slim jackpines and dragged them near his cabin.

Toward evening, restless, and tired from her own strenuous work, Eileen took another walk with Rip, and it was practically dark when she came back. There was no light in the tent-house and when she finally tumbled into bed, she saw with a desolate feeling that everything was still completely dark across the creek.

WHEN she went to get water from the the creek next morning, she stopped and stared at Rip, who had dashed ahead. He was running from one side of the stream to the other, across a sturdy new bridge of recently cut jackpines. Pete must have been working last night by moonlight again!

A now familiar figure strode to the creek bank, his blue eyes dancing.

"Don't order me to tear it out, Eileen, please. See how Rip has taken to it."

How was it this Bill Peterson had the ability to "take the wind out of her sails" before she had even laid her course? To object to the bridge would be mighty small-minded, and it did add to the attractiveness of the scene.

"You did all of this last night? I slept so hard I didn't hear anything," she said casually.

"I was very careful not to trespass," said Pete solemnly. "I stood in the water to work on your side. It was cold, too!"

"I know it was. I hope you got warm later." Eileen shivered.

"I got warm taking a good horseback ride."

Why should she care whether or not Bill Peterson took nocturnal rides? Yet inconsistently, Eileen did care. He should stay here in Warrior Draw, and not leave the sheep alone. Or was it herself she had in mind?

As Pete filled her pail and walked with her to her house, he looked down on the shining waves of her brown hair.

"Can't I persuade you to share my supper tonight, Eileen? I have some fresh trout—beauties." Something in his tone recalled the thrill of that stolen kiss and she flushed.

Why not? They were both lonesome.

"I'd love it," she said warmly. And to her own amazement added, "If you'll share mine tomorrow."

What was she thinking of! Why, this was more than signing a truce with the sheepman! This was fraternizing as though he were a friend. But only a friend, of course.

At supper time Pete proved he was a whiz at frying fish. He also produced cornbread baked in his little sheet-iron stove to a perfect golden brown, and the coffee that he made was strong and hot and good. Eileen cleaned her plate of every crumb.

Nor did Pete forget Rip, who got a big bone, which, although it looked suspiciously like a leg of lamb, neither Eileen nor he questioned!

They had finished the dishes, and Eileen was hanging damp tea towels on a wild cur-

rant bush when the clatter of hoofs filled the air. Along the road which connected Warrior Draw with the lower country, came a rider on a big brown horse. The girl's eyes went wide with surprise as she recognized her persistent suitor, Roy Pollock of the P C outfit.

"Friend of yours, Eileen? He's looking at us crankier'n a disappointed billy goat." Pete was standing at her elbow.

The girl started swiftly toward the bridge, but the rider, swinging from his horse, crossed before she reached it. Roy Pollock's eyes, passing rapidly over the scene, missed nothing. They had never reminded Eileen more of a ferret's eyes, black and sharp and suspicious.

"Pleasant, homey atmosphere around here, isn't there?" His attempt to sound jocular failed to conceal his hostility. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting your neighbor." He cast an insolent glance toward Pete.

An instant later his insolent expression became angry in alarm. "Sheep! This fellow's brought sheep in here, has he?. And you've been paying him a call, Eileen?" He pointed to the grayish shadows in the old corral.

"Of course they're sheep! What did you think they were?" Roy's arrogant manner ruffled Eileen intensely.

Roy's small eyes shot sparks.

"You mean you don't mind sheep? Having 'em right here in Warrior Draw doesn't disturb you? Eileen, my dear, you must have lost all your pride, hobnobbing with a sheepman!"

"Don't be stupid, Roy!" she snapped. She had a strange feeling of guilt. "I dislike sheep as much as I ever did. But I can't do anything about them, so why not enjoy Pete's company, even if he is a sheepman? Pete's all right. This is Bill Peterson, Roy. Bill, this is—"

She turned, thinking the young sheepman was behind her, and saw him walking rapidly up the slope past his house.

"The sheep are safe for the night, Eileen, and I've some other fish to fry. Big ones! See you in the morning," he called back.

AS EILEEN reached the end of the bridge, Roy grabbed her hands and pulled her to him, his glance traveling from her to Pete's rapidly disappearing figure.

"The unspeakable gall of that fellow! You know what it means to your dad and the Circle D to keep this stretch of land, Eileen, yet you make friends with him. Haven't I some rights, too?" His voice grew softer.

"Don't be stuffy, Roy! If I didn't know all about the need for getting possession of Warrior Draw, I wouldn't be here. Let me show you how beautiful it is, over those hills beyond my simple mansion. Another valley, not as large as this, and much more wild."

In spite of her attempts to divert his interest, Roy kept returning to the subject of the menace of Pete's sheep. Finally they returned to the shack. Roy prepared to leave.

"Nobody's watchin' the woollies. I'll just slip over the creek, let 'em out of their corral and whoop 'em down the canyon. Some'll get killed and the rest'll be scattered to the ends of the earth," he said abruptly.

He was starting toward the bridge when Eileen caught his arm. Though she hated sheep she had to stop him.

"Stop, Roy! That's a contemptible plan! There'll be some other way to get rid of the sheep, I'm sure. We know who has the other half of the draw, and we can deal with him. Daddy can buy him out."

"You're acting mighty queer for the daughter of a cattleman!" snapped Pollock. "It can't be that you've fallen for Peterson? Why, I mean I thought that you and me—"

Eileen interrupted decisively.

"This is not your territory or your property, Roy, and until I see Daddy I'll act as I think best under the circumstances. There's nothing more to say now except goodnight."

Muttering grumpily, Roy got on his horse and clattered off, followed by Eileen's sigh of relief. How he bored her! Especially after gay, light-hearted Pete. Not that she was in love with Pete. That was impossible. She represented cattle and he represented sheep. There could be no love between them!

She called Rip into the house. But the big dog acted restless and uneasy, and this uneasiness communicated itself to her. Finally in an effort to quiet her nerves she went outdoors. Instantly Rip began to growl, and the hackles on his neck ruffled angrily.

The rays of a late-rising moon lighted the far side of the draw, and showed someone near the sheep corral, moving purposefully, yet furtively. Eileen watched for a few seconds, then ordered Rip down and quiet. She ran to get her gun. Then, invisible in the shadows, the girl and the dog silently crossed

the bridge, avoiding the moonlight; they kept close among the trees until they were almost at the sheep pen.

The man had already thoroughly disturbed the sheep and had started to open the pen.

"Stop! Or I'll shoot," Eileen called sharply.

The fellow pivoted and the moonlight fell on his face.

"Roy!" cried Eileen. "You wouldn't do that!"

"I would, Eileen! And I will, too!" he snorted. "Give me that gun!"

He sprang toward her. With a lunge, Rip leaped forward hitting the gun in Eileen's hand as he passed her. Fire shot into the darkness, and with a yell of pain, Roy Pollock grabbed his left hand.

Sometime later, after Eileen had bandaged Roy's hand and helped him onto his horse, she advised him curtly not to come back to Warrior Draw. She felt that she never wanted to see him again.

"I don't intend to let that walloper get away with both sheep and my girl," he returned sullenly.

"You're mistaken about that 'my girl', Roy!" Eileen corrected coldly.

If she had ever had any feeling for him it was gone now.

On the following morning, melodious whistling which rose above the clatter of the stream woke Eileen to a day of full sunshine. By the time she had dressed, Pete was carrying water to her door. His presence made her heart leap.

"Do you think it's safe to leave your sheep alone at night?" she demanded. "What if someone who hates woollies should decide to do them some harm?"

"Perhaps it isn't entirely safe," he answered, regarding her with a new expression in his laughing dark eyes. "But just now I can't help it. Anyhow, you and Pollock are the only ones who have discovered my guilt, and nothing's happened yet. Before long I will be able to tell you—"

The way he suddenly bit off the sentence, and his change in expression, brought a flutter to the girl's heart. However, she had decided that she would not tell him of Roy's cowardly attempt to scatter the sheep.

SOME minutes later Pete returned to his side of the creek and about noon Eileen saw a horseman clatter down the draw, and rein his horse up sharply at the tent-house.

"Hi, Peterson," the visitor's voice came to her ears. "I got a message for you. Important, too."

While Rip awakened echoes with his challenge to the stranger, Eileen watched the confab which followed.

"Help me get the woollies into their corral, Stan, and I'll go with you," she heard Pete say.

The two hurried up the slope to where the sheep were grazing, and on their return, Pete shouted to the girl.

"Got to be away the rest of the afternoon, Eileen. But I'll be back by dark."

Trying to throw off a sense of desolation, Eileen got a bite of lunch for herself and Rip. Half an hour later, she was surprised to notice rapidly increasing gloom. Black clouds were appearing above the towering peaks on the high range, forcing the lighter ones to scud ahead of them toward the valley occupied by Donnegan's Circle D and Roy Pollock's P C ranch.

Her earlier apprehension and oppression returned as she scolded herself.

"Ninny! What's the matter with you? You've seen plenty of storms, blizzards, thunder storms, hail, wind. You're not getting jittery all at once, are you? You're sort of a pioneer here. Take the storms with the sunshine, in your stride."

Nevertheless, she noticed the uneasiness and fear of her two saddle ponies picketed on a grassy spot nearby. She pulled up the picket pins and led them up the hillside to a sheltering, shallow cave under huge, overhanging rocks, where she tied them.

Coming down the hill, she looked across at Pete's sheep corral. Something was disturbing the sheep, something more than just the imminence of the storm. Through the sheets of rain she made out a man working, furiously at the side of the corral. Rip was standing on the bridge barking at the stranger. Eileen ran to the bridge. The man was wrenching posts from the corral fence!

How she crossed the bridge, and raced up the opposite slope with Rip beside her was never very clear in Eileen's memory. But she knew she had to save Pete's sheep. She had not quite reached the marauder when he straightened, letting out a great whoop that started the sheep pouring through the opening in the fence.

"Hold him, Rip!" she ordered the collie in a low, tense tone.

Instantly the dog leaped. The man's

frenzied hands beat against the surprising attack of the animal. Rip's jaws had closed on the black slicker, yet his weight was pulling it chokingly tight as he held on, growling dangerously deep in his throat. As the man whirled, trying to throw the dog off, Eileen recognized Ed Bray, one of Roy Pollock's hands, a ratty, unprepossessing individual that she had always distrusted.

The sheep were beginning to scatter across the small pasture between the trees and the rocky hills, when a sheet of yellow-red lightning cracked the sky from one side of Warrior Draw to the other, and heavier rain pounded down upon the world.

Bray was trying to get into his pocket. Eileen, guessing he had a gun, managed to slip her own hand into the pocket as he moved past her, and pulled out a Colt .45.

HOLDING the weapon uncompromisingly on a level with his head she said sternly:

"Take your choice, Ed Bray. Stop a bullet and have Rip tear you apart, or help me get these sheep back into the corral!"

"You win," sputtered Bray. "What can a feller do when he's got a nasty brute chokin' him to death?"

Thanks mostly to Rip, for Bray gave only sullen assistance and Eileen was too distrustful of him to dare put away the gun, the sheep were soon herded back to their corral. When every animal was safe, and Eileen was making Ed nail up the fence, a shout made them both jump and Bill Peterson's steaming, lathered horse came out of the rain and skidded to a stop beside them.

"Eileen! Thank God I got here in time!" He leaped to the ground and pulled her to him, his face full of tender concern that brought blood crowding to her cheeks and a happy radiance in her eyes.

"How did you find out that your sheep were in danger?" she asked, thinking that was what he meant.

"The sheep—! I knew nothing about trouble with the sheep, darling," he answered. "A flood is racing down Warrior Creek. I was afraid I couldn't outrun it and get to you."

Her heart leaped. It was her safety that had brought him racing back. This was what she wanted—Pete and Warrior Draw. A loud ominous roaring startled her and she looked toward the creek.

The water was surging and tossing over the boulders like a vicious animal straining to reach its prey.

Seeing attention diverted from himself for a moment, Ed Bray made a dash to escape, and was completely lost in the murky gloom.

"Stop him, Pete! He let the sheep out so they'd scatter around in the storm," Eileen shrieked.

"Let him go," Pete cried above the wind and roar of the creek. "It's more important for us to get to safety, sweetheart."

"There's a cave on the hill above the cabin," Eileen replied. "Oh, there goes the bridge!"

The turbulent water wrenched loose the little structure and began savagely to tear it to pieces.

Holding the girl with one arm, Pete jumped on his horse, and spurred toward the creek. Twice, three times, the bay balked beside the surging waters before he finally obeyed the spurs and plunged in. Eileen, held securely in the circle of Pete's arm, sent up a fervent little prayer as the animal slipped and almost lost its footing. Only Pete's experienced skill brought them safely to the farther shore, from where they raced to the rock cave.

THE ceiling of the heavens seemed torn away to let rain fall in gray sheets. Weird streaks of lightning smeared the heavy gloom, and thunder shook the earth. It was almost impossible to hear each other's voices. Rip's nervous barking was oddly thinned. Yet with her head close to Pete's lips and his arms around her Eileen heard his words.

"If you didn't love me, darling, you wouldn't have risked your life trying to save my woollies. I've loved you from the second you told me that you had no friendship for a sheepman, so I began to hurry matters to get rid of the sheep. That was what took me away at night."

"Then you're not going to be a sheepman, any more?" she asked. A great content and happiness filled her heart.

"I'd been a cattleman all my life, Eileen, until I got these woollies. I got them only because I needed money quickly. I could realize more in a shorter time with them than with cattle.

"In another valley, not far from Warrior Draw, I had located a ranch, but to buy it took more cash than I had. At last, though

I've got what I need. The fellow who came today brought word that the man who's been dickering for the sheep would meet my terms."

Eileen pulled herself around to look into Pete's dark eyes with alarm.

"He isn't going to keep them here in Warrior Draw, is he?"

"Never, sweetheart!" he answered. "You and I own Warrior Draw. We'll use it for our cattle. 'Our' cattle understand. We are going to be married as soon as you can tell your dad and I can rustle up a parson to tie the knot?"

"Yes," said Eileen, meekly. Then, after a long kiss which made her heart pound more tumultuously than the storm, "Now we can build a house on my side of the stream."

"You're mistaken, darling," contradicted Pete fondly. "We'll build part on each side, and have a porch over the stream, high enough above the creek so no flood can take it away."

Eileen forgot the storm, the roaring of the stream, as Pete enfolded her in his arms and kissed her rain-spattered face. Rip barked inquisitively.

But they didn't hear him.

Branding Fire Song Book

By TEX BROWN

HOWDY, friends and neighbors. How's the tonsils? Oiled up for a little singing? We been writin' and hearin' a lot of songs about how lonesome cowboys was. As a matter of fact, the idea of lonesomeness and cowpokes goes together just like ham and eggs, or something.

But there's more reason to the term "lonesome cowboy" than a feller would think at first. Like the radio folks say, "'tain't funny, Magee."

The fact is that punchin' cows on a big spread today, or almost any spread in the days before fences, was a sure enough tough job for a hombre from the standpoint of leadin' a normal life.

How the Average Young Cowpoke Lived

Look at how an average young cowpoke might have to live. Suppose he went to work for a big outfit in the Fall. They send him out to a linecamp maybe twenty miles from nowhere where he'd only have the company of his riding string, a few rangy steers, a lot of hoot owls, coyotes and wolves and maybe a few blizzards and snowstorms to caress his cheeks.

He'd stay there all winter. Then in the spring they'd round up the stuff, work it, cut out all they wanted to send up to higher ground to fatten, and he'd be off up into the mountains to set and watch the stuff fatten all summer without going to town. Then comes Fall, and the old man rounds up a herd of fat stuff and tells him to streak off to market with it, and be sure to git back pronto.

Well, he ain't been workin' around in locations where the gals was thick enough to git in your hair. He might go four-six months without ever seein' a gal. Then he'd get maybe a short time in which to get acquainted with some pretty miss, and then have to ride.

He Was Apt to Fall Pretty Hard!

So, naturally, bein' where he had to live such a lonely life, he was pretty apt to fall pretty hard for her in a mighty short time.

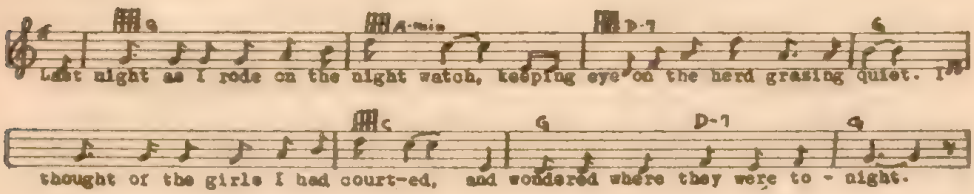
But the pore guy never got to be around her long enough for them to really get to know each other any too well, before he was gone again.

So, he had been in love, then found himself gone, and he'd have to look around on short notice and find him another gal. And so it went.

Some of those old rannies would marry and quit that moving here and there business, but that practically meant that they was through as all around cowpokes. About all they could do would be settle down on some small fenced place and stick with it. But, I reckon they was just as well off, because a man living all his life without any family life of his own ain't what is likely to be a happy man.

So don't laugh. A cowboy wouldn't probably come out and admit personal to anybody that he was a lonesome kind of guy, but he managed to express it impersonally by singing songs about the *other* cowpoke that was lonely. But he ain't foolin' nobody, is he? It's himself he's singing about all the time!

THE COWBOY'S MEMORIES



2.

Sweet Concha Lopez, on the Border,
I almost asked her for her hand,
With a face and a form like an angel,
But a temper that no man could stand.

3.

There was Mary Jo Lane, from Nogales,
A sweet little gal with red hair,
But her dad wouldn't think of her marrying,
So I took the long trail from there.

4.

Jim Beck, my pal, had a sister,
Her name it was Caroline Beck,
She thought she was too good for a cowpoke,
And again my heart was a wreck!

5.

That widow from down South of Phoenix,
Had a ma and three or four kids,
Had me going all of one winter,
But the crowd put my love on the skids.

6.

I've taken my love where I've found it,
And dropped it when wanting to roam.
So now I'm just a wandering waddy,
With the ground and a warbag for home!

WESTERN RANCH GIRLS

by FOGHORN CLANCY

FAMOUS RANCH AND RODEO EXPERT

DOWN in Fort Worth, Texas, the football team of Texas Christian University and its admirers were throwing a ball. They had just hammered out a close victory over the tough Rice Institute team and they felt they had cause to celebrate. Spirits were gay, the music was blithe and they danced in spite of bruises and aches.

Visiting celebrities joined the victory blowout. There was a student from Fordham University, in New York. As he watched the dancers, he suddenly reached out to touch his Texas host's arm.

"Who is that gorgeous blonde?" he asked.

The Texan followed his eyes.

"You mean the one surrounded by all the men? That's Patricia Clark. And she's just as nice as she is pretty."

PAT CLARK

"She would be a sensation in New York," the easterner murmured.

"What do you mean 'would be'? She was. Three times."

"Three times? How'd they let her get away? Come on, let's have the story."

Since the place to begin a story is at the beginning, here are the vital statistics: Pat Clark is five feet four inches tall, weighs a hundred and ten pounds, has light golden hair which photographs darker but looks almost silver under a Texas sun, and hazel eyes.

She lives on the San Gabriel Ranch, which is just outside the town of Georgetown, Texas. The San Gabriel is not a big ranch by Texas standards, some six thousand acres. But it is without doubt one of the most beautiful spots in the state.

The San Gabriel River winds around two sides of the pasture land down in the valley. The prairie rolls up into the foothills where the timber grows thicker and on up, almost to the base of six peaks which stand in a row like so many Indian teepees.

Pat's father, Dr. Clark, is a versatile man who combines several careers in one. He raises some cattle, but more Karakul sheep than cattle and more fine quarter horses than sheep. Quarter horses, as western fans will know, are the fastest short distance horses in the world and it is probably her association with these fast horses that has made Pat such an excellent rider.

Her Own Pony

She started to ride about the same time she started to walk and when she was seven received her own pony as a Christmas gift from her father. The pony was too big to hang on the Christmas tree so he was just tied to it where it stood out in the patio.

Pat named the pony "Tar Baby" because he was black and then she set out to do some serious riding. She covered more ground than the Texas Rangers.

The Clark name goes back to the famous Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Pat's great-grandfather was a cousin of the famous explorer.

He migrated to Texas from Kentucky in

Meet Pat Clark of the San Gabriel Ranch,

Pat Clark on a favorite mount

1834, when Texas was still under Mexican rule. In 1873 he founded Texas Christian University at Fort Worth. It was about this time too, that Texas came into its own in the cattle industry. Thousands and thousands of head started northward in the great trail drives to market.

On her mother's side of the family, Pat's great-grandfather came out to Texas from Louisiana in an ox-drawn wagon in 1857. He bought a huge ranch that covered parts of Stephens, Eastland and Palo Pinto Counties, but sold it during the drought of 1890.

Thirty years later the greatest oil field in the world was discovered on that ranch. Where the ranch headquarters once stood there mushroomed the boom oil town of Ranger.

Going back that far makes Pat a dyed-in-the-wool Texan. She raises her own quarter horses and her favorite mount is "Sugar," a Palomino quarter horse whose pedigree goes back along a line of equine aristocrats including Gold Play, Fair Play and Man O' War.

Pat is also an expert swimmer, for there is a lake on the San Gabriel ranch and swimming rates very close to her other two loves: riding and dancing.

Raised in the lap of luxury, by proud and wealthy parents, Patricia Clark might easily have grown into a haughty little snob. But

there is too much pioneer blood in her, the blood of people who knew privation and hunger and poverty, who worked with their hands and met the dangers and discouragements of life in the wilderness. She has charm and a radiant disposition that made her a favorite as far back as grade school days.

Upon finishing high school, Pat enrolled at the University of Texas in Austin, and went on to be graduated with high honors. During these college years she attended many rodeos in Texas.

She usually entered the sponsor girls' contests and her beauty, charm and horsemanship won prizes for her consistently. She was always in demand and always given a place near the head of the parade.

She was the star of the Dance of Rangeland, the unique square dance on horseback. Her training in this dance came from her father, who is an expert in such matters, having originated and organized the famous Abilene horseback square dance troupe.

When the war came, Pat enrolled with the Red Cross as a home nurse. She gave more than her allotted time each week though she had plenty to do on the home ranch, shorthanded due to the exodus of cowboys to the armed forces.

Won Bathing Beauty Contest

Once, in 1943, she branched out in a new kind of competition, just for the ride. She won a bathing beauty contest at Bergstrom Field, Texas.

It was in 1943, at the close of the Colorado City, Texas, rodeo that Patricia had what she claims to be her greatest thrill. Scouts from the World's Championship Rodeo in Madison Square Garden, New York invited her to be one of the range glamour girls at the great New York show.

They had watched her win the sponsor girl's contest, saw her ride her beautiful Palomino like the wind through the maze of twists and turns of the quadrille, noted the chic figure, the radiant smile, the golden hair streaming in the sunshine. They knew a good thing when they saw it.

This invitation to the big time rodeo is considered one of the greatest honors that can be given any Western girl, so there was reason for Patricia's excitement. She went to New York with the grim determination to make good for the name of Clark and to make her parents proud of her.

She succeeded. Her friendly, unassuming manner, her beauty and horsemanship so captivated the New York fans that the rodeo management invited her back for 1944. But having made the grade, Pat felt it was more important, and more her duty, to stay with the Red Cross and the work on her dad's ranch than to take so much time out for another trip to New York. After the war—

Sure enough, the management hadn't forgotten her, despite the lapse of a year. The invitation was repeated in 1945 and again Patricia Clark was one of the featured range glamour girls of the World's Championship Rodeo. She was one of the only three girls ever to appear the second year.

Pat has appeared as sponsor girl at such rodeos as Big Springs, Spur, Colorado City, Brownwood, Abilene, Midland, Coleman, Ballinger, San Angelo, Stamford and elsewhere.

She didn't always take first prize because the competition in the sponsor girls' contests in Texas is sometimes much keener than in other events. Besides which, the Texas girls are the most beautiful and talented girls in the world—ask any Texan—so she always had really tough competition. But if she sometimes failed to cop first prize, she never failed to win the admiration of the fans.

Never Totes a Gun

Although she is a good shot and can hold her own on the rifle range, Pat never totes a sixgun. The San Gabriel ranch is no longer wild, untamed country as it was when her forefathers drove cattle up its trails.

She can handle a lariat expertly when it is necessary, but admits freely that she will rope cattle only when it is urgent. Her 110 pound weight is too light for opposing thousand pound cows and she is sensible enough to realize it.

As for bucking broncs—her experience has always been with thoroughbreds, fine and intelligent horses. She doesn't care to mix with the mean and unruly specimens of Texas horseflesh and has never made any brags of being a bucking horse rider.

Her friends say, however, that if she had to, she could probably make a very good ride on a tough bucking bronc. She is a wonderful straight rider and has such a knack of balance that it is hard to imagine her being thrown from even the most wildly gyrating saddle.

She's a real Texas range girl—and a pride to the Lone Star!

Before Dale knew what was going to happen, his lips were on hers

Girl With a Maverick Heart

By CYLVIA S. ELVAY

No cowboy could put his brand on lovely Dale Gardner—until a rash, drifting bronc buster seared her heart with a kiss!

IT WAS no job for a very pretty girl. Dale Gardner was thinking just how many people had told her that. She leaned listlessly against the shady side of the small ferry shack dressed in working clothes of denim trousers, red silk blouse, and a tan ten gallon hat. Her lovely hazel eyes followed a tall sun-tanned rider down the steep cliff-side trail to Trick River.

For an entire year now, Dale and her fourteen-year-old brother, Jimmy, had been ferrying horsemen across the rippling current between Texas and New Mexico. She had come to know a lot about men from watching the way they approached the landing.

Riders who forced their lathered broncs with quirt and spur down the rocky precipitous bluff could be counted on for a little

trouble. It was unskilled horsemen who eyed her slim boyish figure with a sly grin, stared boldly at her luxuriant chestnut hair and clearly cut cameo features. They could be counted upon to invite her into the town of Tuckersville for a good time. But there was a safe answer for Dale as the ferry nudged the opposite river bank.

"No thank you," she would say pertly. "I'm already spoken for. Besides my brother and I are in a hurry to get back for the sheriff. Lead your horse off the barge, please. Your fare is fifty cents."

At that moment, young Jimmy would be standing near a double-barreled shotgun at the end of the flat-bottom ferry. He was big for his age and screwed down his features to look tough.

If that wasn't enough for the mashing passenger—if he asked the name of her fiance. then Dale had another good answer.

"He's Curly Lambert, who won the State pistol shoot last year. He owns the big Bearclaw Ranch just over yonder bluff."

At the mention of "Curly" Lambert's well known name, the knowing riders buttoned their lips and rode on. Those strangers who didn't know Lambert's farflung reputation as a man who always got what he went after, also rode on. The bare mention of his pistol accuracy portended danger.

But this was all different when skilled horsemen like the tall sun-tanned rider approaching the river's edge made the crossing. These riders sat loosely in the saddle, hands resting on the kak pommel, allowing the bronc to pick his own way down the rocky trail.

"Howdy, ma'am," they usually greeted, and that was what this tall rider said—then added. "Would you mind carrying me an' Foolish across the wet?"

Dale smiled pleasantly at this rider, wondering how the pert-eyed sorrel had come by such a ridiculous name. Its owner wore working-puncher garb of warm bullhide chaps, checkered shirt, and a cracked Stetson. He removed the big hat to wipe perspiration from his brow with the back of a well tanned wrist. His eyes were clear blue and honest, his chin square and strong.

THE ivory-handled gun tied low to his thigh had seen a lot of use, but Dale doubted that he was a gunman.

"Be glad to take you over, cowboy," she smiled up at him. "If your bronc is spooky, you'll find a snubbing post at the side of the barge. And I have hobbles if you need them."

"Gosh, no, Miss!" the tall puncher smilingly exclaimed as he swung down from the saddle, and led his pony up the gangplank to the barge. "Hobbles would be plumb insulting to Foolish. Why he's got more savvy than most humans."

Jimmy cast off the gangplank. He thrust the ferry out into the current with a big pole. It was obvious that Jimmy cottoned to this stranger. The boy was all grins. As if he knew he wouldn't have to use his shotgun this trip.

As the flat-bottomed boat pushed into the stream, Dale could not help asking the question in her mind.

"If your pony is so smart, why do you call him Foolish?" she inquired.

The puncher dropped the reins of the beautiful sorrel, leaving the horse standing alone in the center of the ferry. He took a weary seat on the board side of the barge and frowned as he extracted a sack of Durham from his shirt pocket and with one hand rolled a cigarette.

"Well, it was this way, Miss," the cowboy started to explain in a slow drawl. "When Foolish was a young and inexperienced cayuse, he made one heap big mistake. He plumb fell in love with a chestnut haired, hazel eyed filly. But this beautiful filly was already spoken for by a big and ugly hammerhead with buck teeth and eyes like chunks of glass. That didn't cut no difference with Foolish. He just went right on ahead sparking this cute little filly.

"So then this big ugly hammerhead knocked the stuffing right out of Foolish. Which served him right for doing anything so silly as to try to cut another hombre out of his girl."

Dale's eyes flashed and she drew back haughtily. But she couldn't be certain whether this puncher was making sly fun of her. The cowboy's features were deadly serious as he lighted his quirly and blew out a stream of blue smoke.

Yet his description of the big horse that "knocked the stuffing out" of Foolish certainly fitted Curly Lambert. The rancher was not long on good looks and didn't have a great many friends in the Tuckerville country. He was a newcomer who had moved into free range with a big herd of stock.

When the owner of the Bearclaw Ranch

vanished on the cattle trail to market, Curly Lambert had taken over the Bearclaw range. True, he had paid the widow of the dead ranch owner a sum of money for grazing rights but she moved away with her son and had never been heard from again.

That had all been six years ago, yet some folk still hinted that Curly Lambert hadn't paid Widow Stewart enough for the Bearclaw. Acquiring more and more land, he was well on his way to becoming the biggest rancher in the State. Which might have been why other ranchers were jealous. There was also talk that Curly Lambert was politically ambitious and might run for United States senator some day.

Dale Gardner threw back her head with pride for the puncher's yarn had fired her.

"Did you make up that horse story for my benefit?" she demanded. She noticed that Jimmy was grinning. He didn't like Curly.

"Gosh, no, lady!" the waddy exclaimed "I don't go around making up stories about things I'm plumb fond of. I'm just a poor busted cowpoke looking for a grubline job. I'm real good at busting bad cayuses like that ugly hammerhead I told you about and I'm a roper good enough for most rodeos. I don't talk much, but I'm just powerful lonely for somebody to talk to. If there wasn't anybody around. then I'd talk to myself, although some people say that's crazy."

Dale stepped back, her hazel eyes still clouded with suspicion. Jimmy was still grinning, as if he had enjoyed everything the puncher said.

"Once you do start talking," Dale said shortly, "you manage to say a great deal, don't you?"

The stranger frowned dismally at the tip of his cigarette. The barge was now almost across the river. It slipped by pulleys along a steel cable, which held it from drifting downstream with the strong current. Jimmy cranked a wheel that pulled on the cable and hauled the ferry. It was not a difficult task to cross the river, but it took a little time.

"I didn't start all this talk, lady," the cowboy said. He blew out another cloud of smoke and cocked an eye at his sorrel, who was watching him as if amused.

"If you think I talk too much, then I'll shut up. I don't want people to be annoyed, although I don't often see the same people twice. Everybody calls me Drifter Jones because I don't stay in one place very long. I've been from Montana to the Mexican Border. I've even seen Omaha, where I went with a shipment of cattle once, but I had to ride the blinds back.

"Some day when I can get a girl who will marry me, I might take her to see New York. Mebbe I can get a job with the rodeo they stage there every year. But first I better get a job around here. because I'm powerful hungry. Do you know anybody who needs a real good cowhand?"

Dale bit her lips. She couldn't be certain whether Drifter Jones was spoofing her. The strangest part was that he seemed very familiar to her, as if she had seen him some place before. In a rodeo or on the dusty streets of some Texas town. She didn't doubt that he had heard about her and the ferry. Travelers were said to tell the tale about the girl who warned passengers that she was engaged to a rancher with a fast gun.

"If you want a job, you'll have to find it for yourself," Dale said coolly. "I'm too busy to look for jobs for drifting cowpokes."

"Thanks a lot for telling me that, lady," Drifter said, his blue eyes lighting up. "That's good advice, just what my Dad used to say. And in those very same words. But I was hearing down the trail a bit, that an hombre called Curly Lambert lived in these parts, and how he needed somebody to break some real tough horses that he couldn't ride himself."

NOW Dale was furious for she knew this puncher had tricked her. He obviously had heard all about her and Curly and his story poked fun at their romance.

"Curly Lambert can ride any horse in the world!" she flared up.

"I bet he couldn't ride Foolish," Drifter Jones retorted easily. "Foolish won't let anybody but me get on him."

"Listen to me, Drifter," Dale said wrathfully as the ferry touched the New Mexican shore, "you owe me fifty cents. I don't want any more talk with you. I'm engaged to Curly Lambert. Now get off my boat!"

Drifter Jones ambled to his feet and took the reins of his sorrel. He swung a long leg upward and over the saddle cantle. He flipped his quirly into the muddy stream.

"You shore must be dead in love with that curly wolf," he said casually.

"I'm not dead in love with any man!" Dale Gardner exploded, "I'm not that foolish. Hand me over fifty cents and mind your own business."

"That's all I'm wanting to mind," said Drifter, drawing a silver dollar out of his pocket, "but I ain't got any business right now. That's why I wanted to know where Curly Lambert lives, but you're scared to tell me. Mebbe you think he'll try to ride Foolish and get hurt. That would make Curly plumb foolish, which you say you ain't about any man."

Dale was seething with anger and Jimmy was chuckling with glee. There didn't seem to be any way to get the better of this puncher. He took words right out of her mouth and twisted them. She had never met anybody like him before.

"Where's your ferry fare?" she demanded, striding forward, holding her hand up to the rider. Drifter showed even white teeth in his broad smile.

He leaned down to pay her. Leaned over slowly at first, and then with astonishing speed his head dropped. Before Dale knew what was going to happen, his lips were on hers, and there was a loud *smack*. She felt a silver dollar drop into her suddenly limp hand.

"Much obliged to a girl with a maverick heart," Drifter Jones laughed. "Keep the change for my trip back across the river case Curly don't hire me."

"Brute!" Dale cried out, drawing back her hand with the dollar and throwing the heavy coin at the cowboy.

Drifter's spur had tickled Foolish, and the horse was away with a leap. The silver dollar struck the animal's rump, fell tinkling to the floor of the ferry. Foolish went on down the gangplank that Jimmy had dropped, galloped across the shoreline and hit the bluff trail on the run. Drifter's amused laugh floated back to Dale's tingling, red ears.

Jimmy Gardner was doubled over with laughter, face red.

"That hombre certainly got under your skin, sis."

"And what did you do to help me?" Dale demanded irately. "I thought that you were some protection, but you're not. If he comes back here again, I'll run him off with the shotgun."

At the top of the cliff bluff, Drifter Jones had halted to wave an arm. Dale turned her head away. She didn't see Jimmy wave back. Dale's fingers inadvertently went to her lips. She wiped them angrily, to take away the warm imprint that Drifter had left there.

It was the first time that any rider had ever been able to steal a kiss from "the girl with the maverick heart," the name that many dusty passengers had given Dale Gardner. And Drifter had known that too.

There were not many kisses that she gave to Curly Lambert. When Dale had said she was not dead in love with any man, she had told the truth. She was marrying Curly some day in the future because she felt that she owed him a debt. Marriage was the only way that she could pay it off.

Dale's father had been killed the year before when the ferry cable broke during a bad storm. He was washed downstream and over the treacherous falls to a watery grave. Before that time, she had never thought much of Curly. But then he had come forward and offered to replace the ferry and the cable. He had learned that it was her father's ambition to send Jimmy to El Paso to continue the boy's schooling. Jimmy had the makings of a lawyer.

Curly had been very nice about his offer.

"Now that your father is gone, Dale," he had said, "and your mother died years ago, you have to be both father and mother to Jimmy. This ferry is a paying proposition. You can save almost a thousand dollars a year with Jimmy helping you in running it. I don't want strangers coming in close to my range, charging me crossing money for my horses.

"I'll fix up the ferry, but you won't use it in high water. And you can give me free crossing for interest on the debt. That's a fair business proposition."

"That's awfully fine of you, Curly," Dale had replied as they sat at dinner in the hotel in Tuckersville. "I know Jimmy would like it. Poor father would want me to send Jimmy to school. He sent me away to school for two years. That's why no money was left when he died."

Curly's hand had stolen across the table, his long lean fingers wrapping about her wrist possessively.

"And that isn't all, Dale," Curly had said. "I know you're in mourning now, so I won't say anything, but you're different from most girls I've met. You'll make a fine wife for an ambitious man some day."

Dale had withdrawn her hand. She had always regarded Curly as much too old for her. He was an ambitious man and had a lot to offer a girl. But not real love. He was too selfish, a hard and ruthless driver,

with many enemies. No one know from where he had come, or what his background had been. Everybody, however, knew where he was going.

Six months after her father's death, Curly began riding over to the Gardner cabin once a week to call on Dale and Jimmy. Curly was not a moonlight rider when it came to romance. He would just sit and talk about his ranch and the plans he had for it. Dale always fixed him up a big supper, which he enjoyed.

"When are you going to marry me, Dale?" Curly had asked one night. "You get on well with people. You'd make a good wife for a United States senator. I'm going into politics this year and I'll be very busy, but after it's over, we could get married."

CURLY had never kissed her up to that point. He got out of his chair and came around the table. Jimmy happened to be in Tuckersville that evening visiting school friends. Dale's heart had caught in her throat. She knew she didn't love Curly Lambert. But she felt that she had led him on.

When he lowered his head to kiss her lips, she was trembling with an unknown fear. She hoped he wouldn't draw her up from the table in his arms, and Curly didn't. She tried to be responsive to his caress, but she couldn't. Curly had seemed satisfied though. He was so sure of himself—too sure.

He laughed after he had lightly brushed her lips with his mouth.

"The girl with the maverick heart," Curly had said. "But when I put my brand on it, all will be different."

It had been the first time Dale Gardner heard the term. She mentioned it to Jimmy when he came home and Curly had left. Jimmy admitted that the punchers were saying she was a maverick that no puncher could rope. It was not an insult. It was said in good fun, but the way Curly Lambert had said it made it a challenge. There was a difference now.

Though she knew that most of her passengers on the ferry referred to her as the girl with the maverick heart, it never bothered her until Drifter Jones had stolen a kiss and rode off the ferry.

After Drifter's departure they made the ferry fast to the New Mexican bank. Dusk was closing in and Winter rains had swollen the river making dusk crossings very dangerous. After fastening extra mooring lines to the ferry, they left for supper.

The sun was getting ready to set in a great sea of gold as they climbed the bluff and crossed the deep sagebrush to a clean and stout cabin. Jimmy went into the cabin to prepare the fire for supper and Dale watched the pink flush creeping across the limitless skies. It was a wistful hour. Her eyes went across the rolling range to where she could see whitefaced cattle grazing. These steers belonged to Curly Lambert.

"I wonder if he got a job?" Dale asked herself, and she was surprised that she was thinking of Drifter Jones. Her hand rose to her lips.

Curly was expected to call later that night. When Dale went into the cabin to prepare the evening meal, Jimmy asked her if she wanted him to saddle his pony and ride to town.

"Why, Jimmy?" Dale asked boldly.

"Well, I thought mebbe you'd like to talk with Curly alone," the boy answered. "I don't want to be in the way of an engaged couple."

"You're not in the way, Jimmy." Dale frowned. That was all she said—all she could bring herself to say.

The moon was riding a clear sky when Curly Lambert's horse loped up to the cabin. Dale and Jimmy could hear his spurs coming to the door. Curly knocked and walked in without being bidden.

"Hello, Dale," he said in a good humor. "How are you, Jimmy?"

There was no kiss.

"How's everything, Curly?" Dale asked with a forced smile.

"I'm doing my homework," Jimmy said, frowning at his book.

Curly sat down at the table, pulled off his big black hat and sent it skimming onto a chair.

"Everything is going along fine, Dale," the big rancher said. "I've got things fixed to run in the primary election this Summer. It's going to cost a lot of money, but I'm sure to win the nomination, and that means election. Yes, everything is going fine, Dale, for you and me.

"I had a good piece of luck this afternoon too. A bronc stomper rode in and offered to tackle that wild string of cayuses I picked up cheap last month. He'll break them for nine dollars a head, a dollar below the regular price."

Dale took a seat at the table, an unac-

countable chill running down her spine.

Jimmy looked up.

"Why didn't you give him ten bucks a head?" the boy asked. "He might get hurt or even killed."

"He was broke." Curly laughed. "That's how I beat him down. But he won't get hurt. He took the bucking horse championship at El Paso last year. And besides, those fools don't know any better."

Fools! Drifter was a wanderer but no fool. Dale bit her lips in chagrin wondering why it hurt her to hear an unknown cowboy referred to as a fool.

"I'm glad to hear of your election promises, Curly," she said to change the subject.

Curly reached across the table, taking her hand, despite the fact that Jimmy was there. His face was florid.

"I was thinking we might be married after I get the nomination, Dale. It would make things look good. Women would like it. They'd all vote for a groom. How about it?"

Something rose up in Dale's throat. Her marriage would be a sacred thing and not something to be used as a pawn in politics. She was willing to make a great sacrifice for Jimmy, but not a sacrifice such that she would hate herself for the rest of her life. She rose slowly from the table, jerking her hand away from Curly Lambert.

Suddenly she realized he was distasteful to her.

"Under those conditions there will be no marriage. Before the election or after, Mr. Curly Lambert!" Dale cried. "I'm not marrying any man for a position that he is going to get. You might as well know that right now."

"Don't get sore, honey," Curly remonstrated, jumping to his feet. "You're going to be my wife and you should want to help me get ahead. I thought you might like playing that little game with me."

"I don't like playing games that are not completely honest," Dale snapped back.

"Gosh! This is developing into a regular lovers' quarrel," Curly chuckled. "I better get out. You just think things over real carefully, Dale. Perhaps you'll see things my way, like you always do. It sure takes me a lot of slow and easy work to put my brand on your heart."

"That's because a true maverick wears no man's brand," Dale replied swiftly. "You had better go now or I might say something you won't like."

JIMMY looked up from his school book. His dislike of the scene was evident in his face.

"That's my advice, Curly," the boy said. "Sis is in a bad mood tonight. She's been snapping at me too. It's because Drifter Jones kissed her on the ferry this afternoon."

"What's that!" Curly Lambert cried. His face darkened with rage, his fists clenched. "That bronc stomper kissed you, Dale?"

Dale stepped back, her head held high, her eyes flashing.

"I never dreamed that Jimmy would tattletale like that, but now that he has I won't deny it." She flashed an angry look at her brother.

"Drifter was just kidding," Jimmy hastily put in. "He only stole a kiss, just like any puncher would do if he saw a pretty girl."

"And what did you do, Dale?" Curly Lambert demanded, hunching his shoulders and stepping around the table. "Were you flirting with him? How did you let such a thing happen if you didn't ask for it? Answer me."

Jimmy got up from his desk and moved to a corner where the double-barreled shotgun leaned against the wall.

"Aw, forget it, Curly," said the boy. "It wasn't anything. Dale wasn't flirting with the stranger. He just leaned down from the saddle and took a peck when she was reaching for his ferry fare."

"You shut your little trap," Curly Lambert snarled. "Dale will answer to me. She's going to be my wife. I thought she never let any man but me kiss her. And mighty few opportunities do I get. I want to know the truth. I'll gun that saddle tramp down when I get back to the ranch."

"And lose your election," Dale laughed mirthlessly. "What's more, Mr. Curly Lambert, I'll have you know that I will kiss anybody I want, and it isn't any of your business. You won't ever come into this cabin again unless you apologize here and now for your tone of voice."

"Me apologize!" Curly exclaimed in amazement. "Why it's up to you to beg forgiveness for letting that tramp—"

"It will be a long time before I beg forgiveness from any man," Dale Gardner replied coldly. "Now, go home before you put your foot in deeper than it already is."

Curly Lambert trembled with rage. He cast a glance at Jimmy over in the corner

of the cabin, then stared long and hard at Dale. With a shrug, he turned to the door.

"Just a maverick," Curly said under his breath, and went out.

Dale and Jimmy heard the rancher's horse squeal under the bite of spurs as Curly Lambert rode off.

Dale looked at her brother.

"Why did you tell him?" she demanded. "You don't like him, do you? You have wanted to break this up for a long time. You really hate Curly Lambert, but do you know why I said I would marry him? It was all for you. I wanted you to be able to go to school—"

"That's why I told him," Jimmy said, grinning. "Because I don't want Curly Lambert for no brother-in-law. I'd rather run the ferry for the rest of my life than put up with him."

Dale slowly sat down at the table. Suddenly her anger was gone. A great burden seemed to lift from her heart. She felt free once more. It was something that she had wanted for a long time and didn't really know it. Once more, she was a complete maverick, wearing no man's brand. She hadn't lost Curly Lambert. He'd come back. But she didn't want him.

Then a new fear assailed her. Her face went white.

"What will he do to Drifter?" She asked Jimmy.

"Something tells me that Drifter can take care of himself," her brother smiled and turned to his book. "Don't bother me, Dale. I've got a book from Judge Hobart about law that I want to read. He says I could take a correspondence course, and he'll help me pass the State exams."

"Jimmy!" Dale cried with joy and ran across the room to hug him. "But I'm worried about Drifter. Curly might do something. If that puncher is killed, it will be my fault. I never should have started talking to him."

"Don't worry about Drifter Jones," Jimmy advised her. "But if you want me to slip out to the Bearclaw bunkhouse, wake Drifter up and warn him, I'll do it."

"Please, Jimmy," Dale pleaded. "There's no other way."

"All right, sis, but I'm going to tell him you sent me."

"No, Jimmy. I hate that man. He's the one that caused all the trouble."

"I wouldn't call it trouble," said Jimmy as he went out the door.

Going to bed was out of the question for Dale. She tried to read a book, but her mind was on Jimmy's trip. A hundred times she told herself that the bronc stomper's troubles were not her concern. She certainly wasn't in love with the man. He was footloose and irresponsible.

Then she remembered that Curly had said Drifter Jones had won a rodeo contest. Drifter himself had said he might get a job with the rodeo in New York. The puncher was not a complete liar. He put just enough truth into his stories to avoid absolute falsehood.

In her mind, Dale could see Drifter sitting on the side of the barge, rolling his cigarette, his lean tanned features deadly serious as he told the story about Foolish. There was no doubt now that he had been talking about her and Curly Lambert. Dale was the filly engaged to Curly, a big ugly hammerhead. But Dale had never seen Drifter before—or had she?

Had he crossed the ferry when her father was running it, and noticed her when she hadn't noticed him? She couldn't be sure.

IT WAS almost midnight before the boy opened the cabin door. He halted, looking at Dale sitting in a rocking chair by a lamp, an unopened book in her hands. Jimmy grinned.

"I found where Drifter was sleeping and woke him up. I told him about Curly."

"Curly didn't do anything to him then?" Dale asked.

"Nope," Jimmy replied. "I reckon Curly went to town for some drinks. I spent a lot of time talking with Drifter out near the corral. Curly came home and went into the ranchhouse to bed. Drifter and I talked some more, then I came home."

"Did Drifter leave the ranch?" Dale asked breathlessly.

"No, he's going to stay and break those broncs for Curly," Jimmy answered.

"But he can't!" Dale protested. "He will get killed."

"He says he most likely takes after his horse," Jimmy said with a grin. "He can't help trying to cut another man out of his girl. Curly will just have to knock the stuffing out of him."

Dale stiffened in the chair.

"I won't allow it!" she exclaimed. "He's just acting foolish to make an impression on me."

"That's what he says," Jimmy said. "He says he's just plumb foolish."

Dale threw her book at Jimmy. He ducked and ran laughing out of the room.

"Jimmy!" Dale cried. "We both are going over to the Bearclaw tomorrow and stop this trouble. I won't have any man hurt on my account."

Jimmy didn't answer.

That night, as Dale lay in her bunk, she made her plans. She believed she was solely responsible for the danger that confronted two men. She remembered the six-gun tied low to Drifter's leg. She didn't doubt that he was as fast with a weapon as he was skilled with a horse. No wonder he was not afraid of Curly Lambert.

But Curly was conceited and thought he could handle anyone. He was faster than most men on this range with a gun.

If an argument started, one man would die. His blood would be on Dale's hands. She had to stop the fight as best she could. Even with a woman's wiles if necessary. She could not let Drifter get hurt. As for Curly, well . . .

Her dreams that night were filled with nightmares of fighting men and bucking horses. She was on a ferry in a raging storm, in which she was dashed upon rocks below a treacherous waterfall.

In the morning, Dale awoke with a start. Jimmy was already up and had the coffee boiling. Instead of denims, Dale took a fringed buckskin suit out of a closet. It was her father's last Christmas present to her. She drew on her best boots, and about her waist she buckled a cartridge belt, to which was attached a hand-carved holster. Into this casing she thrust her .32 caliber pearl-handled revolver.

Dale was primed for whatever might come, with beauty and bullets.

"Come an' git it!" Jimmy shouted through the door. When Dale came in, he was surprised. "Gee, sis, you look like you were going to Stampede Day!"

"I'm going to stampede Drifter Jones off his range," Dale said stoutly.

"Something tells me he doesn't run away," Jimmy remarked, breaking eggs in the frying pan. "Last night he said he sure liked it around here. Asked me how Dad got killed and how Curly Lambert managed to buy the Bearclaw Ranch from old Widow Stewart. I think Drifter knows more about this neck of the woods than he's telling."

Dale's eyes widened in curiosity.

"I have a feeling I've seen him some place before, Jimmy," she said. "He could have worked around here before joining the rodeo circuit."

"Wouldn't be a bit surprised," Jimmy replied. "Here are your eggs, sis. Eat hearty. Something tells me this is going to be a tough day."

"Something is always telling you something," Dale remarked, frowning. "You're getting too big for your hat. So I'm telling you right now that you are not taking that shotgun with you. I'll handle both Curly Lambert and Drifter Jones and I won't need any help from a button like you."

Jimmy grinned and said nothing.

The trail to the Bearclaw led across beautiful rolling range, knee-deep in buffalo grass. In the distance, herd after herd of Curly Lambert's whitefaced cattle were eating themselves fat for market. In the past, hoof-and-mouth disease had taken a terrible toll of stock. But now, with improved breeding methods and serum injections, there was a fortune being made on this range. And Curly was getting more than his share of it.

Dale's memory went back to the former owner of the Bearclaw Ranch, dead six years. Dale had been only eleven when Bob Stewart vanished while taking a herd to the railroad junction. She remembered that it was a year of drought. Money was scarce, and Mrs. Stewart had been left helpless with her fourteen-year-old son. She had been forced to accept Curly Lambert's cheap offer to buy the Bearclaw. Then she had moved away, taking her young son with her.

Dale being taught by her mother, had never gone to the Tuckerville school and met young Bob Stewart. She remembered Mr. Stewart and his family crossing the river on the ferry operated by her father. But at that time, the Stewart button had been too busy with affairs of his own to be bothered with girls.

AS DALE and Jimmy came within sight of the Bearclaw ranchhouse and outbuildings, she couldn't help but realize that all this wealth and luxury would be hers if she surrendered her heart to Curly Lambert. If she didn't, what had the world to offer her? She might continue running the ferry for the rest of her life. Or she might marry a poverty-stricken puncher.

"Jimmy, I'm afraid," Dale told her broth-

er as their ponies turned off the main road toward the Bearclaw headquarters.

Jimmy's eyes were on a corral below the big red-painted barn.

"There's men in the saddling chute!" Jimmy cried. "I can see Drifter climbing up the rails. Curly is there. Come on, sis!"

Jimmy's spurs went to the flanks of his pinto, and the boy left Dale on the gallop. She applied quirt to the rump of her buckskin pony. The shrill cry of a wild cayuse fighting the tightening cinch of a saddle came to her ears. She could see Drifter easing himself onto the hull of a big black cayuse, penned between the sides of the bucking chute.

Before Dale reached the corral, the gate of the chute was jerked open, and the bucking horse with Drifter Jones aboard sprang into the center of the pen.

Curly Lambert saw Dale Gardner, jumped down from the corral rails and started toward her.

"What are you doing here, Dale?" he demanded. "Leave at once!"

Dale drew her buckskin pony to a stiff-legged halt, and she swung down from the saddle.

"I have no intention of going away, Curly," she said, walking forward. "Not until Drifter Jones leaves. If I made any trouble between you two men, I am here to see that it is patched up before it hurts both of you—"

She broke off as the wild bronc in the corral screamed with rage. The pounding of the animal's hoofs caused even Curly Lambert to turn. Now the bucking horse went into a crazy spinning motion. Drifter Jones was riding the animal with the expert skill of a champion. But the bronc was the kind of an animal that no rodeo official would ever allow in the ring.

It was a mad spinner, a cayuse that didn't sunfish and buck-jump like other bucking horses, but a horse that went around like a top, swapping ends and hammering at the earth with all four legs at the same time.

No man could sit such a horse for long. No man could even break such a critter. The horse was a killer, Dale knew. And she knew too, that this was Curly's revenge on Drifter for the stolen kiss.

"Get off him, Drifter!" young Jimmy Gardner shouted. "You don't stand a chance."

Dale raced for the corral rails, but Curly Lambert caught her, and pulled her away. She slapped at his restraining arms.

"Get on your pony and clear out of here, Dale!" Curly shouted. "This is man's work. That bronc stomper contracted with me for the work, and he'll have to work what I give him."

"That horse is loco!" Dale raged, furious at Curly's snide trick of revenge. "It should be shot!"

The spinning cayuse struck hard into the off side of the corral with its rump. Like breaking icicles, the poles gave way, and the horse went floundering through. Drifter was hurled from the saddle like a stone from a sling. He yelled in alarm as his arms spread out and his hat came off. He struck the ground hard, his chin plowing up the dirt He didn't get up but lay there, as if dead.

The crazed horse stumbled through the broken rails, fell, picked itself up. The saddle cinch had popped, and the kak was trampled free under the animal's hoofs. With a wild leap, the shrilling horse darted away, straight toward Drifter Jones' tall form prostrate on the hard ground.

Dale shut her eyes as she clung to the rails beside her brother. A shot blasted out beside her. Jimmy had fired. Dale jumped with surprise for she knew Jimmy owned no pistol. She opened her eyes and saw the animal leaping over Drifter's inert form.

Jimmy's shot had frightened the animal from jumping on the bronc stomper. The horse ran through the ranch yard and out to the open range screaming in its madness as the rope from its halter streamed along in the dirt.

"Thank goodness, he's not hurt!" Dale gasped as Drifter Jones slowly got to his feet.

"Good work, Drifter!" Jimmy sang out. A six-shooter dangled from his hand. "If you had made a move, that cayuse would have sure jumped you. You're a good actor!"

Drifter turned to look at Jimmy..

"Thanks for firing that shot, partner, it scared that bronc out of here."

Curly Lambert strode around the corral to confront Drifter.

"You're fired!" Curly shouted wrathfully. "You told me you could ride any bucking horse in the world. Get your horse and ride before I put a bullet in your hide."

Drifter picked up his hat and beat the dust out of it. His blue eyes turned toward Dale Gardner, and he grinned sheepishly. Then he looked back at Curly, who had a hand on his holstered six-gun. Drifter

walked over to Jimmy and held out his hand for the weapon in the boy's hand.

"I'll be needing that extra hawg leg now, pard," Drifter said to Jimmy. "It's a good thing I loaned it to you last night."

"Keep your hand away from that six-gun!" Curly Lambert shouted, jerking his own weapon from its holster.

But Drifter Jones was too fast for the rancher. He snatched the six-gun from Jimmy's hand, and ducked low to the earth. Drifter's thumb flipped back the firing hammer of his gun. The muzzle spewed flame a yard long. The bullet smashed into the weapon that Curly Lambert had pulled, and was ripped from the rancher's hand.

"Now just stand hitched there, Lambert, with your arms raised," Drifter Jones said coolly, his lips turned in a hard grin. "That horse I just forked was more than loco crazy. It was drugged. I want to see if you didn't tuck a hollow needle under the saddle blanket."

Curly Lambert started moving backward towards Dale Gardner. The rancher's face was white with rage and terror.

"Get off this range!" Curly yelled. "I'll call my boys in from the pasture to shoot you!"

DRIFTER moved over to the fallen saddle, kneeling and cast an eye at the saddle blanket. His eyes left Curly Lambert for a moment. The big rancher grabbed Dale Gardner and thrust her before him as a shield. At the same time, Curly snatched the pearl-handled .32 from Dale's holster.

"Watch out, Drifter!" Dale shouted.

She whirled, struggling with Curly Lambert. The rancher let fire at Drifter, but Dale threw his aim off and the bullet went wild. As the rancher tried to hold her still, she got her arms free and beat her fists into his ugly face.

Jimmy jumped into the fray with a savage yell. He grabbed at Curly's gun arm. The rancher swung his gun gripping fist into the boy's face, knocking him to the ground.

Curly brought up the little gun trying to get in another shot at Drifter. Dale fought like a wildcat as Drifter came in on the run. Curly flung Dale away from him to confront the bronc stomper.

Drifter swung his six-gun barrel down across the rancher's wrist, knocking the .32 caliber weapon from his hand. Then he swung his left fist into Curly's jaw. The blow knocked the rancher backwards. His eyes rolled white as he hit the earth on his back, completely out.

There was a shout from the bull pasture. Dale turned her head. Several Bearclaw punchers were running toward the ranch yard, guns in their hands. Two of the weapons blasted, driving shots over the heads of Dale, Drifter, and Jimmy.

"We better get out of here," Drifter said, throwing up his weapon and shooting back at the Bearclaw waddies. "Jimmy, take care of Dale. Foolish is tied on the other side of the corral. I want that poisoned saddle."

Dale snatched up her pearl-handled gun near Curly's unconscious figure. The rancher breathed hoarsely, mouth open, teeth bared. He looked exactly like a big ugly hammerhead with his buck teeth and snake eyes. Dale breathed a sigh of relief that he was out of her life.

Jimmy brought up her buckskin. Dale mounted, watching the Bearclaw punchers racing toward their broncs in the pasture. Drifter paced up on Foolish, the suspicious saddle in his arms.

"Go ahead fast, Dale," he said. "I'll stay back to keep them from getting within shooting distance. I reckon I better take the ferry across the river until things calm down."

It was the first time the bronc stomper had called Dale by name. A thrill ran through her and it seemed that she had known him for a long time. She put spurs to her buckskin, dashed down the trail to the county road, Jimmy right behind her. Drifter followed, with his six-gun bared as he turned to look back.

Dale, Jimmy, and Drifter rode hard for two miles without incident. Then, far behind them, they saw riders appear on a hill. In the clear atmosphere of morning, they recognized Curly Lambert by his black hat and calfskin vest. The sunlight flashed on a rifle barrel. He meant to pursue them hard.

It was a race now to the bluff of Trick River. For a moment, Dale wondered why she was fleeing. She knew that neither she nor Jimmy had anything to fear from Curly Lambert. The rancher was obviously after Drifter Jones. She looked back at the tall bronc buster and was conscious then of reason enough. His fight was her fight. Again she felt that the slim puncher was part of her life—or had been.

Curly's pursuit meant one thing. He was after the saddle that Drifter carried. If a

hollow needle loaded with drugs was found in the saddle blanket it would convict Curly of intent to murder. And it would certainly ruin his chances for the United States Senate, even if he managed to break the charge of drugging the range bronc. The entire cow country would despise him. And the pursuit proved his guilt, Dale knew.

The Bearclaw outfit gained a mile on the fleeing trio of riders, but they reached the bluff of Trick River with enough time to spare. Dale sent her buckskin down the steep trail to the water's edge, with Jimmy and Drifter following. They dismounted and led the three mounts aboard the ferry. The gangplank was cast off, Drifter pushed the barge out into the current. Jimmy ran to the crank.

"We're safe for a time now," Drifter said, grinning at Dale. "I reckon I can thank you, ma'am, from the bottom of my heart. It was a plumb foolish thing for me to rile the curly wolf. Guess I'll never learn."

Dale's eyes flashed.

"Now, don't start all that silly talk again," she said. "I had enough yesterday. You don't fool me one wit. You planned all this. What's more, I know that Jimmy helped you."

Jimmy grinned at her as he hastily turned the big crank that drew on the steel cable stretching from one bank of the river to the other. The barge was making slow speed. Drifter constantly watched the high bluff of the New Mexican side of the river.

"I ain't denying that Jimmy was a big help," Drifter said, his lean tanned face deadly serious. "But we didn't know if we could count on you, ma'am. We couldn't be sure whether you really were in love with that big, ugly, hammerheaded bronc."

"Stop calling me ma'am," Dale said, stamping her foot. "I'm not in love with any man."

"How about me?" Drifter asked coolly.

Dale stepped back in amazement.

"You!" she gasped. "What ever in the world made you think that I had the slightest interest in you. Why, you are nothing but a foot-loose drifter, a nobody, a common maverick cow hand."

Drifter walked over to Dale. She held her ground, her heart beating furiously.

"An' you're the girl with the maverick heart," the bronc stomper said with a smile. "That makes both of us wild and free as the wind."

His arms reached out. Dale ducked, but was caught. Drifter drew her struggling to him. His lips suddenly were upon her mouth. She cried out, but he stilled her protests. Then Dale knew that her struggles were really nothing but acting. A strange sweetness pervaded her heart.

As Drifter gently released her, she heard the crash of a rifle. Her eyes went to the New Mexican side of the river. The Bearclaw punchers were dashing down the bluff trail, Curly Lambert in the lead. The rancher threw a rifle to his shoulder and fired again. The bullet sang treacherously over the heads of Drifter and Dale.

"Get down behind the sides!" Drifter cried. "I never thought that coyote would shoot at a woman."

The ferry was just past the middle of the river, where the current raced strongest. Jimmy had to keep working the handle of the wheel to keep the barge moving. Drifter ran to the rear end and thumbed two shots back across the river at the Bearclaw hands. The range was long for a six-gun.

Dale watched breathlessly as Curly Lambert jumped from his saddle, ran to the big tool box beside the landing. He lifted the lid of the box and brought out an axe.

"He's going to cut the cable!" Dale cried.

"That's something else he'll have to answer for!" Drifter Jones gritted.

Dale saw Curly strike at the cable anchorage with the axe. Her eyes went downstream to the bend in the river. A half a mile beyond was the falls, where her father had met his death. She remembered that the ferry cable had been torn loose from the New Mexican side of the river the night in which her father had died.

It had been a mystery how such a thing could have happened. But no man had suspected foul play. Yet now as Curly Lambert cut through the steel cable with the axe, Dale remembered that her father and Curly had not been on good terms. Mr. Gardner had always thought that Curly ousted Mrs. Stewart and her son from the Bearclaw with threats. And there had been cattle rustling before that happened. Then the deadly truth smote her. "Drifter!" Dale cried. "He's a murderer too!"

"No doubt about it," Drifter Jones replied coldly. "But we've got him licked."

The cable snapped, went limp. Drifter, quick as a big cat, leaped to catch the slack in the wire. Working furiously, he managed to draw in enough to throw two looping half hitches around the snubbing post at the side of the barge.

The hitches held the ferry from slipping off the cable and plunging downstream over the deadly falls. The end of the cable attached to the Texas shore held. The barge floated swiftly in the current, describing a great arc as it was swept downstream and in toward the eastern shoreline.

Again Curly Lambert's rifle opened up. Drifter fired back with his six-gun.

A scream echoed across the water.

They saw Curly Lambert stiffen and fall across the gangplank left on the shore. Several of his punchers leaped to his body. They didn't pick him up. They turned to look at Drifter Jones, shook their fists. Drifter fired again, his bullet wide. The Bearclaw hands leaped aboard their broncs and rode up the steep bluff trail, leaving Curly Lambert's body behind them.

"They won't get far," Drifter chuckled.

"Why?" Dale asked.

The bronc stomper pointed at the bluff on the New Mexican shore. A band of horsemen had come into view. The sunlight sparkled on one of the riders and Dale recognized he was the sheriff from Tuckersville.

"He was almost too late, Drifter!" Jimmy Gardner cried out. "Look at the shooting."

The sheriff's posse were blasting away at the Bearclaw waddies as they streamed up the cliff trail. For a few moments there was rapid gunplay, but the Bearclaw cowboys were outnumbered. They threw down their guns and raised their hands.

"I reckon that's the end of a rustling hombre that almost got away with murder," Drifter Jones said, walking over to stand beside Dale Gardner. "Too bad Curly didn't live to hang."

Dale looked up into Drifter's eyes.

"Who are you, Drifter?" she asked. "I know that you've been here before. I feel that there's a great deal between you and Jimmy. You know too much about everything."

"He's Bob Stewart," Jimmy Gardner called. "We've been thinking all along that you'd discover that, Dale."

"Bob Stewart!" Dale exclaimed. "Then you are the boy who went away with your mother—"

"And hit the trail to find out what happened to my father when he went to market with a herd," Drifter Jones answered, taking Dale's hands. "It took me two years to find his bones, where rustlers murdered him. And it took me three more years to discover that Curly Lambert had been behind the deal. I laid my plans accordingly. I've been around here a long time, Dale, searching for the proof I needed. Jimmy helped me a lot. So you see we're not such strangers after all, Dale."

"Drifter," Dale asked anxiously, "do you think Curly cut the cable the night that father was killed?"

"I don't doubt it, Dale," the bronc stomper answered. "I spent days trying to find the cable in the falls, but it was no use. Let us talk about something more pleasant. I've got a heap to say."

The ferry had gradually swung against the shore. Jimmy was getting boards for a gangplank for the horses. The boy was whistling quietly, as if he heard nothing.

Dale lifted her face to the tall sun-tanned puncher, her heart soaring.

"I'm just foolish enough to listen to you, Drifter Jones," she said.

"Shucks," Drifter Jones, alias Bob Stewart, replied. "I can think of better things to do than a lot of foolish talking!"

He took the girl with the maverick heart into his arms. Dale felt a sweet contentedness sweep over her. She was no longer a free, wild girl of the plains. Drifter's kiss seared into her soul like a flaming brand.

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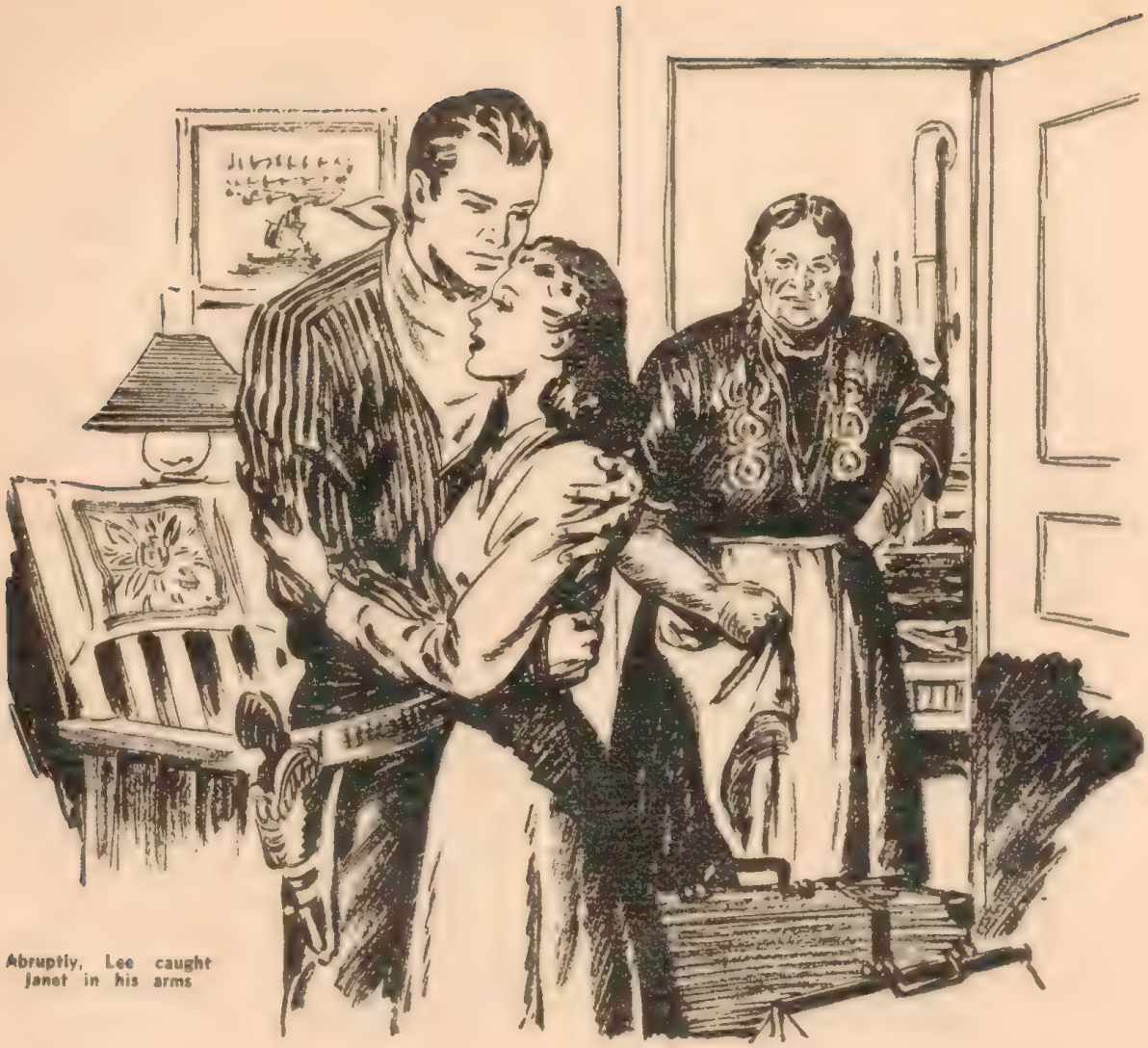

Abruptly, Lee caught Janet in his arms

Pixie of Pinon Canyon

By N. C. RALEIGH

Charming Janet Lyle is wise in the ways of the rangeland, but doesn't know how to compete with a glamorous, artful siren!

JANET walked out to the shelf of rock where one lone pine stood guard. Sitting down on the sun-warmed stone, she rested her pointed chin on her knees, letting the pine-fragrant breeze fling her short brown curls all over her head. She never heard the muted sound of approaching footsteps on the thick mat of pine needles, the quick indrawn breath of the young rancher who stopped at the fringe of junipers.

She might have been a forest sprite—with her green sweater cut from the velvety moss at the foot of the giant pines, and her riding skirt and boots fashioned of brown bark.

"Howdy, miss," the rancher called softly,

as though the graceful green-and-brown figure might vanish at the sound of a human voice.

Startled, Janet sprang up to face him. Her swift glance took in the more than six feet of lithe, blue-jeaned cowboy standing with his wide hat in one hand. His brown eyes were warm and friendly, and the dappling sun chased shadows and lights over his smooth dark head. An answering smile curved her red lips.

"Howdy," she replied to his greeting.

He came toward her, walking lightly with his high-heeled boots, on the slippery needles.

"So you *are* real. I'd have sworn you were some kind of fairy," he admitted. Then he asked eagerly, "Didn't I see the Toppling R brand on your horse back there?"

She nodded and the eagerness sparked brighter in his dark eyes. He was quite close to her now and she could see the clear, healthy look of his bronze skin, the whiteness of his teeth. Her smile grew warmer. There were no men in all the world like the ranchers of the Sierra Negra country, she thought, with the glow of homecoming intensified.

"Then you're Thalia Mathews?" the cowboy was asking, with that eagerness warm as a handclasp in his voice and eyes.

Janet's bright smile faded. So he'd already heard of Thalia, with her blond beauty and her way of capturing any man's heart.

"No, I'm Janet Lyle. I—I work for Miss Mathews."

He couldn't hide the disappointment that flashed through his eyes.

"I was hoping—I've been anxious to meet her," he remarked. "Well, I guess that can come later." He grinned down at Janet. "I still think you're some kind of elf. Are you a stranger to the Sierra Negra country?"

"Hardly. I lived on the other side of the mountains all my childhood," Janet explained.

She was no fairy, but she certainly had a sensation of being bewitched—and liking it. Suddenly it seemed the most natural thing in the world to sit beside Lee Carlton of the LC Connected, and confide that she'd spent the last two years in the city with her aunt and uncle, after her ranch home had been sold when her grandfather died. And how she'd come to work for Thalia Mathews as companion-secretary when the Eastern girl inherited the Toppling R.

Lee shared the sense of enchantment. She could tell by the glow in his eyes, the vibrant huskiness of his voice.

"Janet, dear!" came a lilting call. "I've been looking everywhere for you. I was getting so worried."

There was reproof in the dulcet tones, and Janet, watching Thalia ride out of the thicket had to bite back the annoyance she felt. She was acutely conscious of Lee standing beside her, his attention now focused on the vivid blond girl who made such a dramatic picture against the dark green of the forest.

With more than cordial interest, Thalia let her wide blue gaze rest on Lee as Janet unhappily explained that he was the owner of the ranch adjoining the Toppling R. Thalia graciously allowed Lee to hand her down from the saddle.

She declared with a dazzling smile that it was just too wonderful to have a neighbor like Lee, and there were dozens of things she'd have to ask him about the country and cattle ranching. She managed to appear small and helpless and fragile, though she was a good four inches taller than Janet, and anything but helpless.

"Janet, darling," Thalia suggested gently, "had you forgotten the calf registrations?"

For a split second Janet looked blank. She actually opened her lips to remind Thalia that the registrations weren't due till next week. Then she caught a warning flash of the blue eyes. Janet shut her teeth tight with a little click, nodded her farewell to Lee, and marched over to her pony.

The cowboy's eager voice followed her.

"I've sure been wanting to meet you, Miss Mathews."

Well, you've met her, thought Janet bitterly, riding down the winding, pine-bordered trail. You've met the gorgeous, irresistible Thalia Mathews, and she'll have your handsome scalp dangling from her belt in less time than it takes you to hogtie a yearling, Mr. Lee Carlton. Meantime she's my boss and she'll not let me or anyone else forget it for a split second.

As for her, she'd better completely forget one tall, dark-eyed rancher with a warm grin, and a disturbing huskiness in his deep voice. But her eyes sparkled indignantly and there was a defiant quirk to her curved red lips.

THE next day Thalia decided that she and Janet had better ride back up in

the mountains again.

"Lee seems to be interested in buying a piece of my land," she explained. Her knowing blue eyes added that if *that* was his excuse for seeking her company, she'd humor him. "This is the canyon ahead here—Piñon Canyon."

Janet had no desire to discuss Lee Carlton with Thalia.

"There's a good crop of piñon nuts this year," she observed noncommittally.

They rounded a spur of the mountain, and broke suddenly into a lovely little meadow cut by a tumbling mountain stream.

"What on earth?" Thalia demanded, as her eyes encompassed the campfire, and a three-sided brush shelter. Farther on she could see several hobbled ponies and a scattering of full-skirted women and black-haired children.

"Navajos," Janet explained, smiling in recognition. "They're gathering piñon nuts. We always had them for a week or so this time of year."

"Well, I'm certainly not having them on *my* land," Thalia declared, and promptly urged her pony forward.

"They're harmless, really," Janet protested hastily. "Everyone lets them camp—"

"I'm not everyone," Thalia retorted, blue eyes flashing angrily.

They were at the edge of the camp and had slowed the horses to a walk when a lean black cat darted across the trail. Thalia screamed and jerked her pony sharply to the side, but the cat went on its way, slinking into the brush like an inky shadow.

Janet wanted to laugh but she didn't dare. She knew how seriously Thalia took her pet superstitions. The blond girl had turned pale, and her eyes were narrowed with anger.

"Get off my hand!" she ordered furiously, pulling her pony to a prancing halt before the staring Indians. "You understand what I'm saying all right. You're trespassing. Pick up your stuff and move, right now! Pronto!"

The Navajo women stared at her impassively.

"Who's the head of this tribe?" Thalia demanded.

A wrinkled old squaw came from the shelter. There was deliberate dignity in her slow movements, the way her full skirt eddied in and out with her steps.

"What you want?" she asked Thalia.

"Why, that's Wise Woman," Janet exclaimed. "She used to come over to our side of the mountain."

"Well, please make her understand that they have to clear out of here fast," Thalia snapped. "I won't have a pack of thieving redskins camping on my land."

"But these are respectable people from up north," Janet countered trying to suppress her irritation. "Wise Woman is related to our cook at the ranch."

Thalia barely heard her words as she whirled her pony and rode away, shooting an apprehensive glance toward the brush where the black cat had disappeared.

Patiently, Janet tried to explain to Wise Woman why her tribe could no longer camp in Piñon Canyon, that Thalia was the owner of the Toppling R and didn't understand the ways of Western ranchers. Wise Woman seemed equally uncomprehending of the ways of Eastern ranch owners. Just as Janet began to despair of making any headway there was the light drum of hoofs on the trail, and Lee Carlton rode into the camp.

"Thought I saw you riding this way," he called cheerfully. "I see you're visiting the Navajos."

With difficulty, Janet explained Thalia's orders.

"She—she just doesn't understand how the Indians have always camped here to gather piñons," she floundered.

"Sure, I savvy." Lee's dark gaze swept over the litter of the camp, the half dozen dogs whining and barking and scratching fleas, the household belongings strewn on ground and bushes. He grinned sympathetically. "A lady like Miss Mathews naturally couldn't get used to this in a hurry. We'll just move 'em across the canyon and onto my land."

While he patiently argued with Wise Woman Janet tried to make friends with the children who were approaching like shy forest creatures. One little girl finally came near enough to touch Janet's silk scarf.

"You're just like a soft, bronze pansy with black eyes," Janet declared. "I'm going to call you Pansy Face."

She gave the child the scarf, and turned to see Lee wiping his face with his bandanna. Wise Woman was stalking toward the shelter, muttering.

Standing beside Lee, watching the Indians break up camp, it seemed to Janet that the sun had never been so bright, or the call of the bluejays so saucily provocative. It was wonderfully easy to talk to Lee Carlton, so

deeply gratifying to hear his rich laughter, and catch the glow of his dark eyes.

WHEN the Navajos finally started across the canyon, Lee and Janet turned toward the Toppling R, and with every mile nearer the ranch Janet felt her new happiness slipping away, leaving her frightened and alone. It seemed to her that Lee's manner changed, that he became abstracted and indifferent to her as they approached the big adobe ranchhouse.

Thalia met them at the corral.

"Did you get rid of those savages?" she demanded. "I can't get over the feeling that that horrid old woman was planning trouble. Those cold, beady eyes, and the way she muttered—" Thalia shuddered.

"Wise Woman is the lady Medicine Man of the tribe," Janet remarked, with an impish gleam in her bright eyes.

"Medicine Man?" Thalia's voice was a bit shrill. "Surely they don't still believe in that—that—magic business now!"

"Even civilized people dodge black cats," Janet reminded her, sliding off her pony, "so who can blame the poor Indians for casting spells and believing in curses and charms?"

"Janet's just teasing, Thalia," Lee cut in. He sent Janet a frowning glance and her impishness instantly wilted. "Sometimes our kind of Western humor is a little rough," he apologized.

Seething with hurt and resentment, Janet presently went up the new flagstoned walk to the house. She wished *she* knew a little magic. She'd make good use of it right now.

Next day Lee called early for Thalia. Busy at her desk in the very efficient office Thalia had furnished, Janet forlornly watched them ride away. Thalia's blond hair floated lightly in the sunshine, and Lee's head turned to her as if she already had him on a lead rope, Janet reflected unhappily.

The Indian cook, Blowing Grasses, whom Thalia had peremptorily renamed Kate, came to stand stolidly beside the desk.

"Why my people move?" she demanded. "No good camp now. Other place good."

Helplessly, Janet glanced after Thalia and Lee, and Kate followed her glance.

"He savvy," she muttered, and stalked back toward the kitchen with a swish of her many skirts.

It was noon before Janet had finished her work. Feeling lonely, and even a little depressed, she decided to ride over to the Indian camp. It would at least be gay there. She tucked a big box of rich chocolates in the saddlebag, planning to divide it among the Navajo children.

The squaws were, as usual, not very sociable, but the children swarmed around her, emboldened by Pansy Face's proudly displayed scarf. Pansy Face herself soon deserted Janet, slipping away alone into the forest. After a while, Wise Woman made her appearance, and asked where Lee was. She grunted enigmatically when Janet explained he'd gone riding with Thalia.

Janet was halfway home when she remembered the candy for the children. When she looked in the saddlebag she found, to her surprise, that it was quite empty. So, the little monkeys found it themselves, she thought ruefully, and was glad that there was nothing else removable in the saddlebags.

When Thalia returned home she seemed more radiant than ever, and full of high spirits.

"Ranch life isn't nearly so dull as I'd been led to expect," she informed Janet gaily. "Tell me, darling, what does one wear on a moonlight ride in this country? Or would you know?"

"Are you planning a—a picnic?" Janet asked through suddenly dry lips.

"Picnic?" Thalia's bright laughter rang out. "No. We'll not be thinking of—food." She leaned against Janet's desk, enjoying herself. "Let's see. The yellow wool sweater is good with my hair. Or how about all white? That's it. White would be dazzling in the moonlight and there's something bridal about all white that would just set the mood."

Janet's face paled and her eyes dulled with unhappiness. She tried to keep her composure under that amused, merciless stare, but finally she could face Thalia's knowing, mocking smile no longer. When she glanced out the window Janet was almost relieved to see Kate standing there. At least here was a friend. The Indian woman made an imperative gesture with her arm, and Janet stood up.

"Excuse me a moment, Thalia. Kate wants to see me, I think."

Outside Kate said loudly,

"Wise Woman send you something." She brought a small bottle from the folds of her skirt. "She make it for you from the herbs.

You use heem when the moon is full."

"I use it?" Janet asked, with puzzlement. "What for?"

"Get you the man you want," Kate explained. "Powerful medicine. Rub on face and hands. Let the full moon shine on. Get you your man."

"But—but, I don't want anyone," Janet stammered, trying to hand the bottle back to Kate. "Thank Wise Woman, but tell her I don't need her love philter or whatever it is."

"Wise Woman send to you," Kate insisted, and before Janet could protest again, the Indian cook walked away, moving with surprising speed for her bulk.

Trying to hide the bottle in her hand Janet went back to the office. It was humiliating that her feelings for Lee were so obvious that even an old Indian piñon gatherer felt sorry for her.

"What'd Kate want?" Thalia demanded sharply. Her alert glance fastened on Janet's cupped hand. "What did she give you?"

"Just—just—some kind of Indian medicine," Janet muttered, setting the bottle on the filing cabinet. "I'll throw it away, of course."

"Well, come help me get ready for tomorrow night," Thalia insisted maliciously. "I'm sure you know *all* about ranchers, Janet, and I *do* want to please Lee. He's so sweet."

Janet gritted her teeth and began to figure how long it would take her to save enough money to get back to town and get another job.

HOWEVER long it would take was too long, she admitted the next morning. She had a strong hunch that if Thalia and Lee actually went on that moonlight ride his capitulation would be complete. She could just imagine Thalia in white riding clothes, with her golden hair a drift of curls, with her lilting laughter and artful ways. What chance would Lee Carlton have against such wiles? He'd be blinded by stardust and glamour and come out of it to find himself corraled for life by an unscrupulous, thrill-seeking siren.

But, thought Janet sadly, trying to blink back desolate tears, there was nothing *she* could do to prevent Thalia from leading Lee a merry chase across a moon-drenched prairie. She might look like a forest elf, but she had no magic power.

[*Turn page*]

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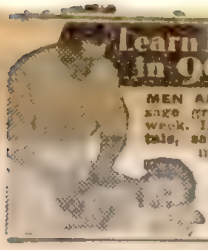

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It was evident, the next morning, that Thalia wasn't taking any chances with Janet. She appeared after breakfast with a list of errands in town that would keep Janet busy all day. So Janet departed, her pointed face downcast, the gray eyes still and shadowy, and the red mouth unsmiling.

When she returned it was late afternoon, and shadows lay long and pointed as crows' feathers across the road. With sinking heart, she watched the sun dance on the western rim of the mountains. It would be a perfectly wonderful evening, still and sweet and lovely. A night for romance.

No sooner had she closed the door and started down the hall than a veritable tornado of words descended on her. It resolved into Thalia, who was lashing out recriminations with such fury that Janet for a blinding moment almost believed the blond girl had lost her reason.

"You're fired!" Thalia finally shouted out. "And I should sue you for trying to disfigure me for life!"

Gasping and speechless, Janet backed away, and Thalia followed her into the office. There the light struck full on the blond girl's face, showing it swollen and blotched, the once blue eyes now mere fiery slits between puffed lids.

"Go ahead and gloat over your handiwork!" screamed Thalia. "And then pack your bags and get out! Get out of my house and off my ranch, and if you dare use one of my horses I'll have you arrested for horse stealing!"

Bewildered, stunned, Janet escaped to her room. Yet, through the shock, she began to feel a sense of relief—relief that she was no longer working for Thalia Mathews. She couldn't think about the long miles into town, or how she'd make them afoot, with darkness coming and herself burdened with two heavy suitcases. Nor dared she think about Lee and never seeing him again.

But even this fleeting recollection of him caused a great rush of grief and longing. Tears filled her eyes as she flung her belongings into the cases.

Presently when the last garment had been packed away, Janet dried her eyes, and trying to keep her face as blank as a mask, she walked out into the hall. She was about to set her suitcases down and reach for the door, when it suddenly swung open. It was Lee Carlton, and his eyes were troubled.

"Howdy, Janet," he declared heartily. The genuine friendliness and warmth in his voice almost broke down her hard-held reserve.

"Listen," he hurried on, "tell Thalia for me that I'm sorry but I can't make it for that ride tonight. I know she said she'd be tied up all day and so couldn't go out with me to look over that piece of land. We decided to go tonight because there's a full moon. But now something's come up."

It must be her imagination, Janet thought, that colored his hurried, apologetic explanation with relief.

"Something came up?" she echoed, clutching at anything to keep him there longer so she could look up at him, catch the dark glint of his eyes, hear the warm, rich tones of his voice for the last time.

"Yeah, one of the Indian kids was taken sick suddenly and I'm driving them into the doctor. Could be appendicitis or something serious."

There was the sound of a door flung wide and Thalia stood in the doorway of her darkened bedroom.

"Did I hear you say you were standing me up?" she demanded, her voice thin and sharp.

Lee turned toward her.

"There's no one else can go and the kid—"

Thalia's brittle laugh cut him off.

"Well, I'm glad to know just how I stand with you. As it happens I wasn't going on that ride anyhow. I'm leaving on the night train to Los Angeles. And as soon as I see my broker this place will be for sale and good riddance!"

Lee took a quick step toward her.

"You really mean that?"

Unbelieving, "You'll sell the ranch?"

"Gladly," she flung out, and then slammed her door shut.

Janet caught Lee's arm.

"Which Indian child is sick?" she asked troubled. "The smallest? The one I called Pansy Face?"

He nodded. "Poor little tyke's doubled up with cramps. They don't know why, but I don't believe in taking chances."

"I know what's the matter with Pansy Face," Janet exclaimed suddenly, and proceeded to tell Lee about the chocolates taken from her saddlebag.

"Well, that's sure a relief," Lee declared. He glanced warily toward Thalia's closed door. "What in tarnation struck her? Last I knew she was crazy about the valley."

[*Turn page*]

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The ROSICRUCIANS
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CRAZY about a certain rancher in the valley, you mean Janet thought, and painfully her troubles swept back over her. She stood there fighting back the tears, conscious of Lee regarding her with puzzled, concerned eyes, when there came a shuffling step down the hall.

Kate the Indian cook, came up to them.

"Missy lose this?" she demanded, and held out a small bottle.

Janet winced.

"No," she said faintly. "I didn't lose it, Kate. I left it in the office."

"I find heem in boss' waste basket this morning," Kate stated. "Empty."

"S-so it is," Janet agreed, staring in fascination at the bottle. "Kate, what was in that bottle?" She suddenly cried.

The Indian woman's teeth shone in a mirthful smile.

"Nothing but leetle water and crushed poison oak leaves, missy."

"Poison oak?" Janet gasped. "You—you meant for me to rub that on my face?"

"Not *you*, missy," Kate explained. "Wise Woman know *you* no fool." She jerked her head toward Thalia's door. *"She's* always snooping."

Now Kate looked down at Janet's suitcases and grunted.

"Boss kick you out, missy? How you get to town?" Her beady black glance fixed on Lee, who was watching them with bewilderment.

Janet bit her lip. She blinked fast, but two tears squeezed out and rolled down her cheeks. Then, abruptly, she was caught tight in Lee's arms, and her face snuggled against his shoulder.

Faintly she heard Kate's placid voice.

"Me called Blowing Grasses," the Indian woman was saying, and with a soft shuffle of footsteps she was gone.

Lee was saying something in a muffled voice, and now that Janet's swift storm of sobbing had stopped she could make out the words.

"—been wanting to do this since the day I met you. But I always figured business should come first. Fact is, if I didn't get the Toppling R to sell Piñon Canyon to me

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pronto, my spread was going to dry up and blow away."

Janet stirred in his arms.

"Then you wanted to meet Thalia s-so bad just to buy that canyon from her?"

Gently, Lee pushed her away so that he could look down into her face.

"Why else?" he asked blankly.

Janet's face brightened as though a light blazed from her very heart.

Swiftly Lee was taking hold of her luggage, and drawing her outside.

"Let's get out of here," he murmured huskily.

Walking toward the hitchrack in the rosy glow of the sunset he smiled down at her.

"Reckon it'll take some explainin' to get this all straightened out," he remarked. "But right now, even if I didn't know this whole danged spread would be up for sale, I'd forget everything else but holding onto the girl I aim to marry."

He stopped short, dropped the suitcases and swung Janet into his arms.

"I sure caught me a fairy queen that day in Piñon Canyon," he declared, kissing her full and warm on the lips.

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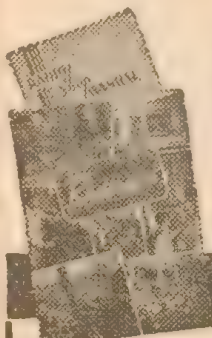

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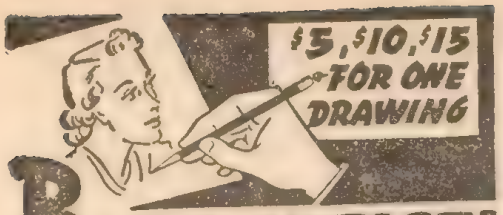

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AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 10)

ments were treated in the same manner. Those went upon the two piles.

Mrs. Long gasped as she saw him turn to her personal wardrobe as he completed the destruction of his own. All her finery was given the same treatment, thrown on the two piles. After that he assailed the kitchen stove, breaking it apart with an axe, and so on until every utensil, chair and whatnot in the house was broken into fragments.

"There yuh are," said Colonel Long to his missus. "You've got half of the money and you can now take yore pick o' the rest!"

The stage had come along on its way to Sacramento and the colonel hailed it.

"Mrs. Long's goin' down the road a bit to see some of her kin and git a breath of fresh air," he said. "Take her as far as this double eagle'll pay for, and then she'll tell whar else she wants to go."

That, fellahs and gals, is the celebrated divorce story of Colonel Jack Long of the California gold diggin's, who later come to swell the list of guests at the famous Shoo Fly Restaurant, what was *not* run by a widow, in the early town of Tucson, Arizona!

LETTERS FROM READERS

THE other day I stepped into the office where I hang my hat times when I ain't wearin' same. I wasn't lookin' where I was goin' and I tripped and fell head-first into a big basket of letters from members of the BRANDING FIRE CLUB.

Reckon I must have looked plumb silly with my head and shoulders buried in all that mail and my legs waving around in the breeze. Anyway the boss is passin' by and he stops and stands there lookin' at me.

"We certainly get a lot of mail for the AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE department," he says just like nothin' had happened.

"Glub," I says, for I never could talk good with my mouth full of envelopes and postcards. "Guble—glub."

"You never told me you could talk Indian, Tex," says the boss. "You surprise me."

By that time I had managed to get out of the basket, and was standin' on my feet and feelin' as foolish as I looked.

"Wouldn't it be easier to look over the mail without standin' on yore head?" asks the boss.

He went away before I could answer, but all the same I knew that he was pleased at all the mighty fine letters we're constantly gettin' from club members and I'm plumb tickled pink.

If there are some of yuh that haven't joined THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB then

get busy and do it right away. Yuh'll find the coupon in this department. All yuh got to do is fill it and mail it to us with a stamped, self-addressed return envelope so we can send yore free membership card to you right away.

And now, gather around, all of you, and let's start lookin' over the mail. Just to be shore and get in as much mail as possible we may cut yore letters down a little—but it's just to save space. And remember we shore thank all of yuh for writin' and join THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. Let's go!

Please make room for a new-comer from the West. I'm 5 feet 3 inches tall, have brown hair and blue eyes. I used to be a rodeo rider so can tell some interesting stories. My hobbies are collecting souvenir spoons, salt and pepper shakers and odd cream pitchers. The first five to send me any of these will get a large tinted picture of myself.

Mildred Hartman.
1703 2nd Ave. No., Great Falls, Montana.

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for sometime now and the more I read this magazine the better I like it. I am 18 years old, 5 feet 7½ inches tall, weigh 140 lbs. and have dark brown hair and blue eyes. My hobbies are collecting poems of all kinds, and I love horseback riding, fishing and camping in the wide open spaces.

Doris Brokens.
16552 Ventura Blvd., Encino, California.

I am 15 years old, have blonde hair, gray eyes and am 5 feet 3 inches tall. My favorite hobbies are horseback riding, bike riding, collecting foreign money, collecting picture postcards and photographs. I promise to answer all letters.

(Miss) Billie Waldrys.
Box 981, Alamogordo, New Mexico.

I am 18 years old, weigh 132 lbs. and am 5 feet 4 inches tall. Have dark brown hair and eyes. I like to ride horses, hunt and swim. I play the guitar and sing.

Keziah Boston.
McLean, Va.

I am 18 years old, have blond hair, brown eyes, am 5 feet 7 inches tall and weigh 150 lbs. My favorite hobbies are playing the violin and riding horseback. I will exchange letters and photos with anyone.

Floyd Stoner.
R. 1, Box 93, Tepton, California.

I am 5 feet 1 inch tall, weigh 105 lbs. and have dark blond hair and blue eyes. I will answer all letters.

Mildred Caswell.
R. 1, Litchfield, Maine.

I am 33 years old, 5 feet 4½ inches tall and weigh 150 lbs. I have dark wavy hair, brown

[*Turn page*]

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eyes. I live out of the city with Mother and Father and I get mighty lonesome.

Harold Carpenter.
4th St. Ext., Route 1, Barberton, Ohio.

I am 16 years old, and have dark brown curly hair. I love all kinds of sports, especially horseback riding. My hobby is collecting movie star pictures and cowboy songs. I will answer all letters I receive.

Phyllis Lonsinger.
1009 D, Fulkerson St., Bagley Downs, Vancouver, Washington.

I am not entirely a shut-in but near it. Have a bad crippled leg and about all I can do is read, write letters and listen to my radio. I enjoy THRILLING RANCH STORIES and would like to hear from pen pals young or old, male and female, and I will guarantee to answer all letters. I love youngsters and to write letters and to go to church.

G. E. Carpenter.
E. 39 Glass Ave., Spokane, 13, Washington.

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for some time and like it very much. I am a French-Canadian girl, 23 years old, 5 feet 2 inches tall and weigh 130 lbs. Have brown hair and brown eyes. I am taking a course in hairdressing and beauty work and I have lots of time to write letters so how about writing to me.

Fane Deveau.
43 Victoria Road, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

I am 16 years old, have brown hair and eyes. Weigh 123 lbs. and am 5 feet 5 inches tall. My hobbies are swimming, bicycle riding and hiking. Would like to hear from everyone so come on and write.

Marguerite Barrett.
Herrick Avenue, Warrensburg, N. Y.

I am 19 years old, 5 feet 1 inch tall, weigh 105 lbs. and have dark brown hair and hazel eyes. Will answer all letters.

Rita Freener.
113 E. Park Ave., Dubois, Pa.

I am 15 years old, have bright red hair that is naturally curly, brown eyes, and am 5 feet 6 inches tall and weigh 130 lbs. I love to read, write and ride horses, also swimming is my favorite sport. I will answer all letters received.

Martha Jean McLain.
Rural Route No. 3, Reed City, Mich.

I am 5 feet 4 inches tall, and have light brown curly hair and brown eyes. My favorite pastimes are many. Will answer all letters.

Margaret Welker.
Route 3, Box 174, Morgantown, W. Va.

I am 5 feet tall, have light brown hair and dark brown eyes. I enjoy all kinds of sports and like music and dancing. Will exchange snapshots.

Mary Depas.
99 Hallock Street, Jamestown, New York.

I live on a 3500 acre ranch. Have 600 head of

cattle, horses. I am 40 years old, 6 feet 3 inches tall. Have black hair, blue eyes and am still single. Anything you want to know about ranch life? Come on you folks, let's go to the rodeo today.

A. M. Morse.
c/oC. V. East, Molson, Washington.

I am 21 years old, have brown eyes and brown curly hair. My hobbies are collecting cowboy pictures and writing cowboy songs.

Ruth Lee Howard.
3767 E. Tulace St., Fresno, California.

I've been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for many years but have never been as lonely as I am now. So won't someone please write? I am a war widow, 24 years old. Have brown hair, brown eyes and am easy to get along with. I promise to answer all letters.

Sue G. Klimas.
516 Terrace St., Hanesdale, Pa.

I certainly enjoy reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES very much. The stories are really tops. Also your companion Western magazines are likewise interesting reading. I am 27 years old, 5 feet 6 inches tall. Have light brown hair and gray-blue eyes. I play stringed instruments and like to sing, also have many other interesting hobbies.

Kay Newcomb.
Fenwich, Michigan.

That's all for this time—but we'll print more of yore fine letters in coming issues. And here's a list of some more folks who are new BRANDING FIRE CLUB members:

Louise Williams, 1313 N. Adams St., Bay City, Michigan.
Betty Coppes, Route 5, Defiance, Ohio.
Nelda E. Capson, Box 1056, McGill, Nev.
Lorrie Holberton, 46 Chippendale Rd., Rochester 12, N. Y.
Freddie Osborne, 615 Field Ave., Detroit 14, Mich.
Betty Munsinger, Lance Creek, Wyoming.
Blanche Curson, 82 Northumberland SC Deveham Rd., Norwich, England.
Irene Andrews, R. D. 1, Box 164, Eldred, Pa.
Gladys C. Poore, Keysville, Virginia.
Teresa Dovley, 204 Federal Street N. S., Pittsburgh, Pa.
George Valley, Dunnyfields Farm, Newport, R. I.
Dorlene Umberger, Britton, So. Dak.
Pat Murphy, Route 3, Snohomish, Wash.
Betty Crelvan, Box 142, Blue Rapids, Kansas.
Glenda Porter, Route 5, Mayfield, Ky.
Leon K. Shivono, P. O. Station D, Cleveland, Ohio.
Mrs. Opal Armstrong, 613 Highland Ave., Queensboro, Ky.
Mary Depas, 99 Hallock Street, Jamestown, N. Y.
Ruby Catherine Payne, 203 Sixteenth Street, Knoxville, Tenn.
Addie Fiez, Route 1, Box 133, Crows Landing, California.
Nancy Gilfillan, 513½ Jefferson St., Waterloo, Iowa.
Lena Brooks, Route 2, East Gadsden, Ala.
Nelda Haenel, Rt. 1, Box 407, Fairbanks, Texas.
Esther Trine, Box 153, Rt. 1, Sun Valley Ranch, Sheridan, Oreg.
Merry Hill, Box 78m Brookings, Oregon.
Katherine Doshen, R. D. 1, Tarentum, Penn.

Shore was mighty good to hear from all you members of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. We are thanking each and every one of you for being with us.

[*Turn page*]

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

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The future is dangerous. Fear fills most hearts. But may I say to you that there can come into your life, dancing flashes of the Spiritual Power of God? I mean NOW. And when you do find, and know this beautiful Power,

Dr. Frank B. Robinson

whatever problems, trials, fears which may beset you, melt away under the shimmering Power of God. In place of these fears, doubts, and trials, there comes a lovely Peace—a Peace which only God can give—and POWER?—well—the human race knows little of this POWER, which upsets many old concepts of God, and puts in YOUR hands, and mine, the Power Jesus promised when He said:—"The things that I do shall ye do also."

I want you to know of this Power. I live for no other purpose. For when this dynamic, invisible Power changed my life, my duty was very plain. TELL OTHERS—that's what God said to me, and I've been doing that faithfully for the past 18 years. Write me a simple postcard, or letter, NOW, and ask for my 6000 word message, which will give you a slight insight into the most soul-stirring revelation from God this world has ever known. Address me as follows:—"DR. FRANK B. ROBINSON, Dept. TG1-46 Moscow, Idaho, and this message, which is TOTALLY FREE, will be sent by mail immediately. **But write now—ere you forget.** The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. TG1-46, Moscow, Idaho.

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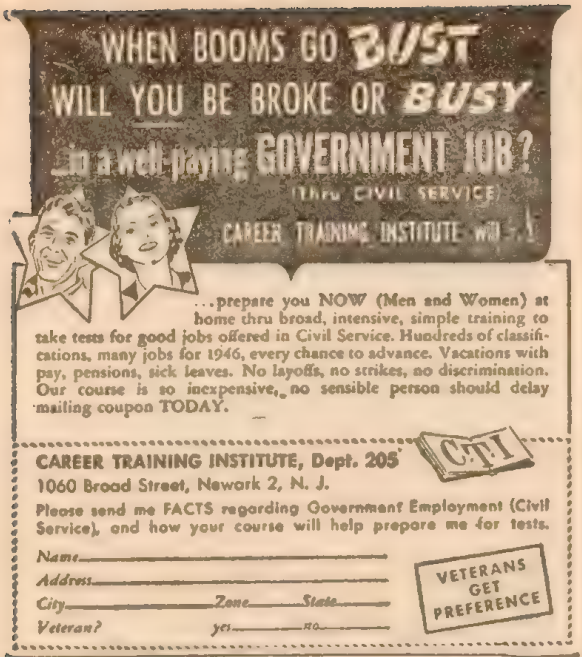

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Everybody please address all your letters and postcards to the Editor, THRILLING RANCH STORIES, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Thank you!

OUR NEXT ISSUE

HERE we go just bursting with pride. Yes, sir, we're feelin' pleased as all getout. And why, you ask, just as though I wasn't goin' to tell yuh anyway. It's because of the fine collection of stories we've got all set and ready for the next issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES. Such being the case I'll tell yuh about them right now.

First comes JACKIE OF THE OPEN RANGE, a grand romantic novelet by Stephen Payne. Seems that Jackie Hearndon was the daughter of a sheepman and a right pretty little gal. Trouble was that her father had a hard time finding a spot where he could graze his flock in peace, especially in cattle country.

So when a young rancher named Henry Cole told Dad Hearndon there was plenty of room to graze the sheep up in the Porcupine Hills, the old man moved there with the flock and his wife and daughter. They had just settled down there when a good-looking young feller in range clothes rode up to the wagon where Jackie was washing her hair. She asked his name.

"I'm Lance Arthur," he said. "I own the Slash A outfit, over on Little Bear Creek, and this happens to be my cattle range."

"There are no cattle on it," Jackie said quickly, defensively. "It's open range, Mr. Arthur."

They didn't quarrel about it—at least Jackie and Lance didn't, but her father ordered the owner of the Slash A to keep away from the sheep camp. Lance was looking for his cattle that had been on this range and were now missing, and so he rode away.

Later Jackie rode over to the Slash A ranch and impulsively decided to cook Lance a good meal and have it all ready when he showed up. He was mighty pleased when he found her there—but while they were eating, Ike Watson, owner of the I W, and the big cowman in that neck of the woods, showed up. Watson was feeling right proddy and he accused Lance of shoving off all his Slash A cattle onto I W range.

Lance Arthur denied that he moved the cattle there—but when Watson saw Jackie and learned she was the sheepman's daughter, that made him all the more sure that a trick had been played on him. From that moment on there's plenty of peril for Lance and Jackie—but just how the trouble on the range is straightened out, and how Jackie finds love, makes JACKIE OF THE OPEN RANGE a mighty entertaining yarn!

Then there is THE MONTANA KNIGHT, the fascinating novelet by Shirley Manners which also appears in the next issue. When Glenda Allen's father died, leaving her alone in the world, her uncle took over the Bar X O ranch, where the girl had been born and brought up.

Glenda believed the Bar X O would be hers when Sam Allen passed away. But hardly two days had elapsed after her father's funeral be-

fore Glenda's uncle, Clint Starbuck, produced Allen's notes and claimed that from time to time he had loaned the rancher money. There was nothing Glenda could do about it except turn over the ranch and move out.

After that Glenda went to work for Chet Gaffney, who owned the feed and grain store in the town, and lived at a boarding house.

But she was haunted by the departure of Hap Warren, who had been the foreman of the Bar X O but refused to work for Starbuck and left. He said good-by to Glenda, telling her he was going to try his luck out Wyoming way, and promised to write, but she had never heard from him. This made Glenda unhappy for she was in love with Hap and she was sure that he liked her a lot.

And then, when she needed him most—Hap Warren came back to her! What happens from then on makes THE MONTANA KNIGHT a story that packs plenty of excitement and romance!

Another grand novelet in the next issue is COURAGEOUS GIRL, by Thelma Knoles. Jinny Pennington was from the East and so it was pretty hard for her to convince the man she loved that she was the sort of gal who could spend her life in the cow country. You'll find her escapades mighty fascinating.

There will also be a careful selection of shorter romantic yarns and interesting features in the next issue. Plenty of good reading for everyone! See you all then, folks!

—TEX BROWN.

WAR VETERANS, ATTENTION!

DURING the past few months this magazine has received a number of inquiries from Veterans of World War II, asking us for information regarding the opportunities for establishing themselves in a business, or securing employment in the Western states. We feel that these boys are certainly entitled to authentic and up-to-the-minute information that will be a guide to them in planning their future.

We have therefore sought the cooperation of State authorities in the various Western states and have on file data that will prove interesting to any War veteran, or any other reader who has plans for heading into the great open spaces. If your hopes for the future are tied up in a farm or ranch in the West, drop us a line, giving us some idea of the place you're chiefly interested in, and what you want to do there. Enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope for the reply.

Typical of the information being placed at our disposal by State officials is the attached letter from L. G. (Pat) Flannery, Executive Manager of the Department of Commerce and

[*Turn page*]

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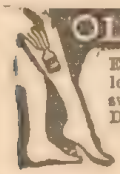

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Industry of the State of Wyoming. Mr. Flannery says:

This is in reply to your letter concerning possibilities in this country for returning veterans. (I happen to be one myself—an old retread.)

I know this state like a book—have roamed it for twenty-five years. Have seen quite a little of just about every other kind of country there is, too. And if there is any other place that offers real opportunity to returning veterans, I haven't found it. Wyoming is the land of tomorrow's opportunity.

But the veteran has to be a right guy to start with—with confidence, strength and energy—ready to work hard, take setbacks with a grin, get knocked down and bounce back for more. We can't use those who think the world owes them a living and are out to collect. But we do have room for plenty who are ready to put out and take it, with an eye to the future. Men who will *develop* the possibilities that are here.

A reclamation program for Wyoming is in the planning stage. Involves ultimate construction of dams and reservoirs to cost more than $200,000,000. Will double the state's irrigated farm and ranch lands. Means new cities and towns. Homes for many thousands of new citizens. Means great quantities of electric power for new industries.

In addition, the state has $4,000,000 saved up for public postwar work. (Quite a little for a state of only 250,000 people.)

Wyoming has more coal than any other state. Enough known deposits to supply the present demands of the whole world for about a thousand years. It has untouched mountains of iron ore and other metals. It has room—lots of room. Atomic bombs would have to fly quite a distance to hit us. Industry, reluctant or otherwise, is beginning to look our way.

I think Wyoming has the most invigorating climate on earth. Dry, clear cold in winter that

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Yes, sir, it's quite a country, especially for young man who wants to work with an eye on tomorrow. America's future vacation and recreation land. More accommodations for visitors needed—lodges, camps, dude ranches, etc.

Biggest problem today is not enough homes. New citizens who have come to live with us and returning vets have every city and town jam-packed. Families have to double or triple up. When materials and labor are again available this state will have a home building boom worth seeing—and plenty of other construction.

That's what Mr. Flannery has to say about Wyoming. He's a straight talker, and gives you the dope right from the shoulder. So if you'd like to consider the West as your new home, let's hear about it, and we'll try to steer you right!

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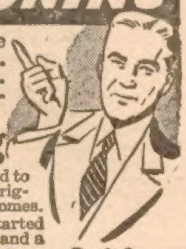

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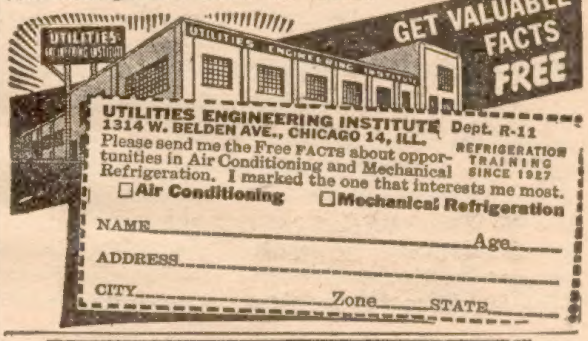

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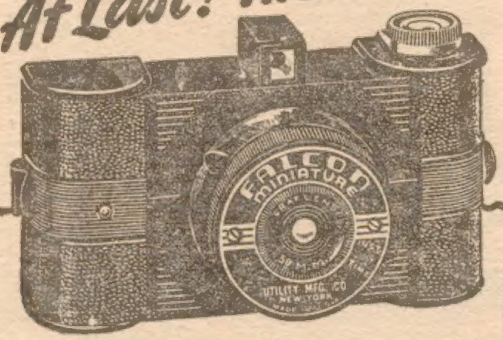

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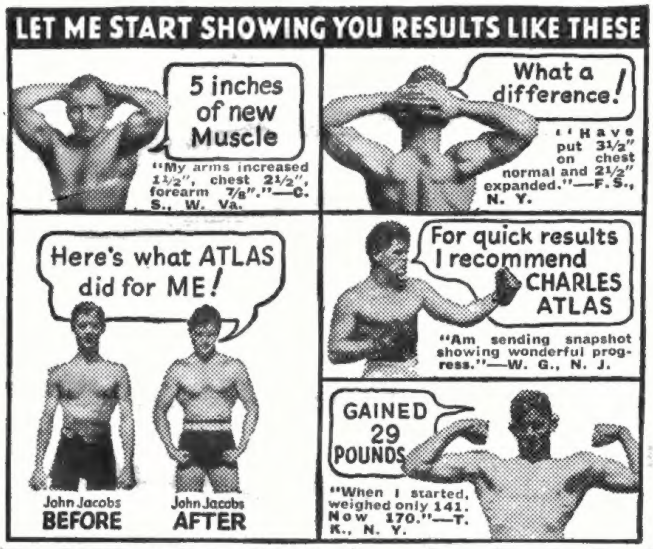

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I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through *"Dynamic Tension"* you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body — watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No theory — every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK

"Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from - the - shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today, AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS. Dept. 77F, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 77F
115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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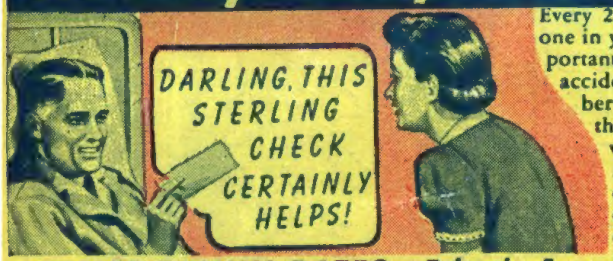

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